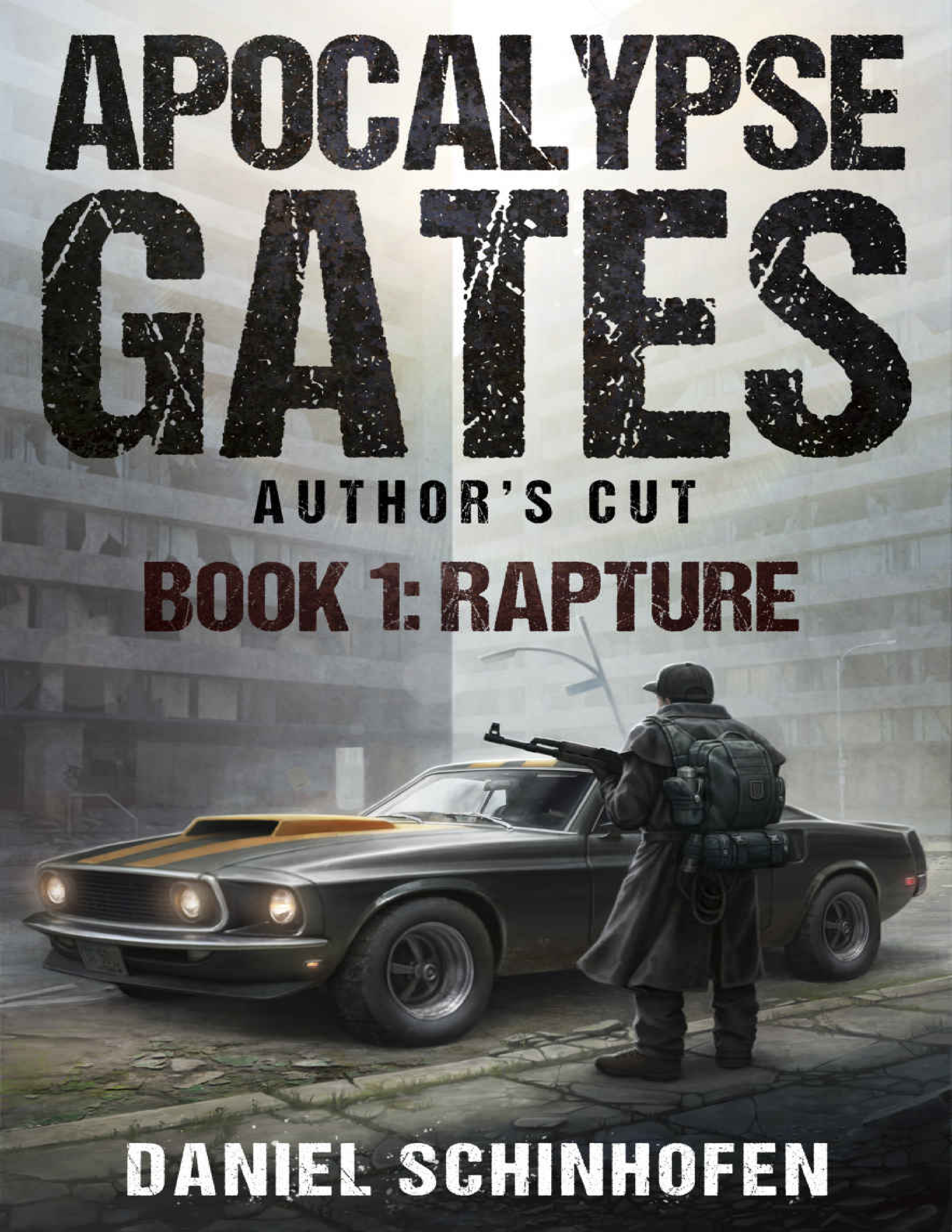

APOCALYPSE GATES
AUTHOR'S CUT
BOOK 1: RAPTURE
DANIEL SCHINHOFEN

Apocalypse Gates

Book 1:

Rapture

Author's Cut

Daniel Schinhofen

In loving memory to my Grandma Terry.
She always told me to follow my dreams.
It was a little late for her to see it, but I did as she told me too.

Contents

Chapter One

Alvin groaned as his eyes twitched. His hands came up to clutch at his head, which felt like it had been smashed open. Face scrunched up in pain he rolled to his side, his legs curling up into a fetal position. After a minute the pain began to subside, going from death inducing to a simple headache. Sighing in relief, he blinked his eyes open to see a smooth grey wall in front of his face.

He tried to figure out where he was. His apartment didn't have grey walls, which meant he was not in his bed. Sitting up, he looked around. It didn't take long, as he was in a ten-foot square room. He was lying on a solid block made out of the same grey material as the wall. A few feet away was a stainless-steel toilet and sink combination, just like he was used to from jail.

"Where the fuck am I?" he muttered as he looked up at the ceiling. The single light source above him seemed to be a recessed circle. He couldn't make out a bulb even when he tried squinting at it.

"Revival process successful, test subject four thousand six hundred and forty-two has been revived. Welcome to your new life." The voice seemed to come from all around Alvin, who jerked in surprise as he looked wildly around to find the source. "You are about to undergo the tutorial period. You may ask a few questions before we start."

"Where the hell am I and what the fuck is going on?"

"The standard ones it is." The voice was that of a bored technician. "You are in our virtual lab. Your brain was scanned and uploaded into our network thanks to court order Debtors v. Cryogen. You are now our property, and we plan to make money off of you. As for what is going on,

you will be thrown into a virtual world to 'play' a game. The better you do, the more experience you gain, which you can use to upgrade yourself and your gear. You only get a single life to start with, so don't die."

"Wait, are you saying that I died and my brain was put on ice?" Alvin asked, trying to recall if he had ever signed up for that.

"In the year 2020, you signed up to have your brain cryogenically frozen upon your death. You paid in full, to the company Cryogen, for them to keep your brain until such time that science could provide you a new body. A year later you died. Your Will was followed and your brain frozen. However, Cryogen, after many years of bad business, went bankrupt and had to dispose of their debts. The courts ruled that the brains not collected by family members could be sold to other companies for medical experiments due to a sub-clause in the contract you signed. Therefore, you are now our property. Huzzah for you."

"So, I died, my brain was stored, then sold to you and now you want me to play a death game?"

"Basically correct. You will be recorded as you struggle to survive. Those who give us entertaining video that we can sell will receive bonuses. Your other option is to do nothing and die once you enter the tutorial. Your choice, live or die. Good luck."

White light enveloped Alvin, momentarily blinding him. When he got his sight back he was on the side of a road in the middle of nowhere. Across the street was a small stopover place. He could see a convenience store with a single gas pump, a motel and about another dozen buildings behind them. A blue screen appeared before him, seeming to hover in the air. He read the information, his eyes wide as he tried to take it in.

Welcome to Apocalypse Gates!
You have begun the tutorial. To complete the tutorial, survive for 24 hours.
Experience will be rewarded based on your actions! Good Luck!

Alvin tried to touch the box, but as soon as his hand passed through it, the screen vanished. “Holy fuck, it is like a game,” he breathed out. He had been a decent gamer before his death, but he wasn’t sure if any of it would be helpful here. “How do I call up my status screen?”

Another screen appeared before him. This one showed a three-dimensional image of him along with a slew of numbers and other information.

Alvin Leon Lambert
Human (0 experience)

Brawn 3.31
Nimbleness 5.23
Aptitude 4.69
Personability 2.23
Hardiness 3.79

Spells:

Powers:

Frowning, he tried to touch the Brawn stat. A short description appeared next to it, along with a second pop-up telling him about stat averages. He read it and then the others to get a better idea of what they did.

All stats are out of a 10-point maximum for humans. Average is 3.5, Olympic level is 7.5.

Brawn: Your physical strength. This determines how much you can carry, how much extra damage you do in melee and your chance at breaking things. Joe Average, that’s about you in this category.

Nimbleness: Your physical agility. This stat determines how flexible you are, how quick your reflexes are, how easily you can move

each part of your body. Used for all hand-eye coordination tasks as well as your ability to dodge. Those years of being a bad boy are paying off here, aren't they?

Aptitude: Your mental prowess. The stat is used to help you figure out complex puzzles or other mental gymnastics. Smart enough to know what you can do and what to walk away from, good thing huh?

Personability: Your personal magnetism. This stat helps you influence people based on physical looks and personality. Gods, you really are a prick, aren't you?

Hardiness: Your physical body. This stat represents your physical stamina, dictating how much you can push your body before fatigue sets in. Also affects how much damage each part of your body can take before it is rendered disabled or destroyed. Maybe this is how you survived all those beatings?

Alvin mulled over his stats and couldn't find fault with them, except for the snark. If he had been put into a game, they would be about right. His Personability was really bad, he knew he was an asshole, he didn't need it pointed out to him. He had always been quick to learn things and he had picked his fair share of pockets when he was younger. That explained his Aptitude and his Nimbleness stats to his satisfaction.

He glanced at the buildings across the road, then looked to the west as the sun was slowly sinking behind the distant hills. He looked back at the buildings, noticing they didn't have any lights on and a cold chill ran over him. 'Apocalypse Gates… I wonder what kind of apocalypse?' he wondered as he stared at the buildings.

He checked the road again, just to make sure no cars were speeding at him. Not seeing any dangers, he crossed the street, his hands brushing against his jeans as he walked. Blue jeans, white t-shirt and sneakers, was all he had to start with. A quick search proved there was nothing in his

pockets. It also proved that his sense of touch was just as sharp as he was used to.

No lights were on in the gas station, but he still tried the door, finding it unlocked. His palms tingled for a second as a rush of old memories from his younger days came to him. It would be so easy to take whatever he wanted from here. The register would probably crack easy enough, plus he suddenly felt a need for a drink and snack.

“Hello, is the store open?” he asked as he pushed the door open. He paused with the door open to listen, but no return greeting came. He did smell the scent of blood in the air, blood and offal. He hadn’t smelled that for years, and hadn’t missed it in the least.

He entered the building, licking his lips as a pulse of fear washed over him. The counter was just a few feet away. He stepped quietly over, peeking over it. He swallowed against the sudden bile in his throat. The dead body sprawled behind the counter was not a pretty sight. The multiple gun shots to the torso, large caliber handgun exit wounds, clearly visible as the body was face down.

Looking away, he tried to push down the rush of memories that came to him. He half noted the open register with a sigh. He would be fine as long as he didn’t leave prints all over. He just wanted to grab some water and a snack before getting out.

Turning away from the counter, he crossed to the fridge doors. Electricity had been off for a while from the feel of it, as the doors didn’t radiate the cold as they normally would. Using his shirt, he opened the door and grabbed a bottle of water. As he did, a hand shot forward from behind the bottles, just missing his shirt as he jerked backwards.

“Fuck,” Alvin shouted, slamming the door shut as the rack behind the glass began to rattle. Turning, he ran down the aisle, grabbing a bag of jerky as he went by. Just as he made it to the front, the clerk with the gunshot wounds lurched to its feet. “Fucking zombies!? Really?!”

He dashed out the glass door, taking a left and running for the motel. The sun had sunk lower, casting long shadows that stretched out. Alvin glanced towards the motel and had a bad feeling about it. He needed something to use as a weapon. The motel was a bad choice as they were unlikely to have any weapons. There weren't any cars out front of the place, which would mean no guests. He paused as he debated whether the motel or the houses would be the better place to search.

He looked back at the store just as the glass door pushed open and the clerk came stumbling out. Teeth gritted in anger at being pursued, Alvin decided it would be better to check the houses. He would need to hope that somebody had a weapon. Turning down the side street between the motel and station, Alvin started to jog as he ripped the top off the water.

He took a big gulp, his eyes scanning for movement as he went. His steps slowed as his brain nudged him about something that was out of place. None of the houses he could see had vehicles. Nothing parked in any driveway, and most didn't have garages. It was just wrong for there to be such a lack.

"Fucking game," he growled as he ripped the bag of jerky open and stuffed a few pieces into his mouth. "You fuckers are just sick," he muttered, thinking of whoever was behind this setup.

"Think Al, think," he said to himself. "You just need to survive. Trying to hole up in a house might work but probably won't. That is where most probably go wrong trying to survive the first day. What I need to do is get away from the dead, but at least two are aware of me." He looked back again, seeing the two zombies from the gas station still following him at a slow shamble.

"Good news, they're slow. Bad news is they probably don't stop. Why am I talking to myself?" Alvin clamped his mouth shut as his brain finally kicked into gear. A weapon would be nice but he didn't need one technically to survive, he just needed to not die. Staying where corpses

were after him while he was unarmed was a bad idea. Going for a walk down a deserted road at night wasn’t a great idea either.

He passed the first four houses, thinking it likely the sick fucks who made this game probably put zombies in them, more than in the other houses. He picked the sixth house and went to the front door. He twisted the knob, to find it locked. He ground his teeth, wishing he had a set of picks on him. Shaking his head, he noticed a bit of baling wire next to the door. He grabbed it then knelt down next to the lock, working the wire into the lock. This was a horrible idea, but it was that or hope he could kick the door in.

The door unlocked easily enough and he quickly opened it to step inside. He sighed in relief, but then his eyes widened as he heard sounds coming from the closest houses. “Fuck,” he hissed, he needed to search the place quick and get out.

He wasn’t going to rush, though, as there might be someone or something home after all. Nothing moved nearby so he stepped into the house fully. TV, sofas, pictures, just like any house you would expect.

If the homeowner had a gun it would probably be in the bedroom. He glanced into the kitchen. Thankfully, it was empty. He approached the door to his left, which was closed. He checked the knob, it turned easily in his hand. He thrust the door open and stepped back, just in case a zombie was there. His heart wound down after a few seconds when nothing lurched out at him.

The sun set, bringing darkness to the land and to the room he was in. Cursing silently, he squinted into the room, not seeing anything suspicious. Under the bed first, then the closet he decided, maybe the nightstand if he was looking for a pistol. He went to the bed, dropping to his knees and praying that nothing would bite him as he stuck his hand under the bed.

Carpet and a box, so he dragged the box out. Adult magazines along with a vibrator. He tossed the box back under the bed and pulled the nightstand open. More complicated toys along with a set of furry leather

cuffs. Figures he would find the kink house, he mentally sighed as he shut the drawer.

As he got back to his feet he could hear movement from outside the house. Grimacing, he went to the closet, opening it, pitch black greeted him. ‘Fuck’, he silently cursed as he needed a flashlight. He slid his hands along the walls just in case. He found a length of wood and grabbed it as nothing else was there besides clothes.

He left the darkness and went back into the main room just as a zombie came stumbling into the house. Alvin looked at the hockey stick in his hand, now being able to see what he had grabbed. Not great, he thought, as he stepped into the kitchen. A back door was visible so he went to it, throwing the locks before stepping out into the night.

As he exited the house, movement to his left caught his attention, he jabbed at it with the stick. That was enough to fend off the lunge from the moaning figure wearing a maid outfit with a set of snapped cuffs on her wrists. Her throat had been cut open, but the blood that had cascaded down her front was dry.

“No means no, lady,” Alvin grunted as he shoved the zombie back a step with the hockey stick, then turned and ran for it. Cursing, he realized he left his water and jerky in the house. He’d set them down by the bed.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Alvin cussed as he knew he should head back to the station to grab another set. Then he should start walking down the road. There were too many zombies in this small podunk stopover.

He headed for the store again, detouring around a group of three zombies that were lurching down the street. He was thankful they moved at the speed of a slow walk, it would be easy to outdistance them at least. They weren’t ‘28 Days Later’ fast zombies, thankfully. If they had been, he would have been fucked.

After the detour, he made it back to the store. He grabbed water and jerky again, not caring about prints. Who would care about petty theft, when there were zombies around? As he made it back out of the store, he looked down the street towards the houses. He could make out a dozen figures shambling towards him.

“Adios, you undead fucks,” Alvin snarked, as he started down the road at a trot. With jerky in his pocket, water in one hand and hockey stick on his other shoulder, he thought he might have a chance to beat the tutorial.

After ten minutes, he settled into a walk and took a drink. The moon came up, illuminating the landscape for him. Vaguely Great Plains States, is what it looked like to him, definitely not a desert, or a forest, or mountains.

“I’m in the middle of nowhere, with zombies behind me and who knows what the fuck else ahead of me.” Alvin paused, taking a seat on the road. He would hear a car long before it got close to him. He took the jerky from his pocket, eating it while washing it down with sips of water. “Maybe three hours into the twenty-four. I can stay up for a full day, that won’t be an issue. Getting a little thirsty and hungry won’t be bad either.”

He sat there letting the slight breeze blow over him as he looked around. Fall weather, it was slightly chilly but at least he didn’t have to worry about freezing. He could wait for a few hours to see if zombies showed up. If not, he was fine. If they did, he could just loop around them and go back to the podunk. Maybe he could find a flashlight and search a bit more.

Two hours later the zombies came into sight again, all twelve of them shuffling down the road. Getting back to his feet, Alvin sighed. He started at a jog away from the zombies at a ninety-degree angle. He watched as the zombies all shifted to follow him.

Shrugging, he set off at a ground eating jog back towards the buildings. As he went he had to slow to a walk several times as he felt

himself starting to get winded. He sipped the water as he went, even pausing to urinate at one point. “A game that you need to take a piss in, how novel,” he grumped as he started jogging again.

When he made it back to the podunk stopover, he decided to go into the gas station first. That seemed the best bet for being able to find a flashlight. It would also have the best visibility with the large glass windows for the moonlight to pour through.

After a few minutes of going up and down every aisle he finally found flashlights. Grabbing one he tore it out of the package, then went to the front where the batteries were behind the counter. He popped open a pack of AA batteries and dropped them into the flashlight. He got it turned on than proceeded to search the building. He found a crowbar in the back and dropped the hockey stick, which had a crack in it, probably from his jab at the zombie earlier, in favor of the metal bar. With his new weapon, a flashlight and a fresh bottle of water he set out to explore.

He went out the back door as he headed for the houses, figuring the motel would be a bust without guests. The first two houses had broken doors where zombies had forced their way out. Should be safe enough, he figured, as he went into the first one.

He got through five houses before finding a shotgun. There were two shells already chambered in the old side by side shotgun, but no other shells to be found. He hooked the crowbar through a belt-loop on his jeans and took the gun with him. As he exited the house he could hear the zombies moaning as they shuffled after him. Rolling his eyes at how persistent the zombies were being, he sighed.

“It’s like the government, following you until you pay them taxes,” he grumbled with a smirk. “No, that’s not fair to the zombies. They have more brains than the government, and even want more brains to boot.”

A louder groan caught his attention as another zombie came around the corner of the house. He shouldered the gun and pulled the trigger,

aiming at its head. It dropped like a marionette with its strings cut. As it dropped Alvin leaned forward, emptying his stomach rather suddenly. After a moment, he righted himself to find the other zombies closing in. He started walking away from them, washing his mouth out as he went.

He shivered. He had locked that memory away. Now it came crashing back to him, the abusive foster parent who had beaten him every day. Frank Harris had acted like an upstanding man when he was out in public, but at home behind closed doors he beat the foster kids he took care of. But Frank had forgotten to lock his room one day. Alvin had gone in and found the shotgun under the bed.

At eight years old, Alvin Leon Lambert committed murder. He shot Frank as soon as the man walked in the door from work that night. Alvin went to juvie while the cops investigated, and it took them months to find other children willing to give statements that Frank had abused them. Alvin was eventually cleared of the charge of murder, but by then the damage had been done and Alvin had learned that the system was broken. By the age of ten he had started to commit petty theft against anyone who crossed him, it didn’t matter to him whether it was an adult or another kid.

He pick-pocketed teachers for lunch money. He stole his first car at thirteen, and the Principle of the junior high was pissed when his shiny Corvette was taken for a joy ride.

Shaking his head to force the memories away, he started to jog down the road again, leading the zombies away from the buildings. Two hours out, then circle back to town. He was able to search the rest of the houses on his next trip, after using the shotgun to blow another zombie’s head off. This time he was able to swallow the bile in his throat as the head burst apart. He was glad it was night, so the gory mess was devoid of most of its color, but the smell was horrible.

He dropped the now empty shotgun for a metal bat he found in the last house, which left him with just the motel to check. He grabbed some more jerky as his stomach was empty again, along with a bottle of

Gatorade. Heading down the road and back for the third time gave him enough time to search the motel. He found a panic room in the manager’s office. He loaded up the room with some drinks and food before he shut himself inside and prayed that his tormentors would teleport him out after the time ended. As he drifted off to sleep he heard the zombies shuffling around outside of the room.

Chapter Two

Alvin jerked awake with a cold sweat covering his body. His heart pounded as he tried to shake the nightmare image of Frank rising as a zombie from being shot and trying to kill him. He could hear pounding on the reinforced steel door of the panic room.

He wondered what time it was and how long he had left to wait for the tutorial to end. A pop-up appeared before him, the same blue box as before. It showed a timer counting down.

Time left on Mission: 09:13

He watched the timer tick to 09:12. “Another nine hours of sitting here and waiting,” he muttered, looking around the room. Nothing but steel walls and the door. He had to wonder why a motel had a panic room. As he did, he recalled there had been no vehicles in the stopover either, which meant it was placed here for the game.

He made a small meal out of the premade sandwiches he had brought and water, then propped himself against a wall and waited. After an hour get got as comfortable on the floor as he could and closed his eyes again. He rolled for a bit, but eventually fell asleep again. When he woke again, the pounding on the door had gotten louder. Blinking, he looked at the door, which had a small dent in the center of it.

“Holy fuck,” he whispered, thinking of how strong the zombies would have to be to be able to dent the reinforced steel door. He pulled the timer up and breathed a sigh of relief to see he only had a little over two hours left. He doubted the undead could get through the door with only that amount of time left. It also made him realize just how useless trying to hole up in one of the houses would have been.

He snacked again as he waited, bored out of his mind. Shrugging, he went over to the door and began to beat out a counter rhythm to the pounding, using empty bottles as drum sticks. After a minute, the pounding stopped. Blinking in surprise, Alvin stopped as well.

The silence was deafening for two or three minutes, then the door resounded as something hit it hard from the other side. Backing up, Alvin decided playing the drums had been a bad idea. The harder pounding was a lot slower but it kept up for an hour, the door actually denting visibly as he watched. Licking his lips, Alvin glanced at the timer. A little under an hour now. He just had to hope that the zombies didn't begin to think about getting tools to help them.

Not knowing if he would be allowed to take things with him, Alvin stuffed his pockets with food and dropped a few bottles of water into his shirt, just in case. With ten minutes to go Alvin breathed a sigh of relief. The door was holding. Unable to resist, he picked the empty bottles back up and began to play drums again on the door.

He could hear the angry groans of the zombies as well as the hard thuds into the door. He figured the zombies were actually throwing their bodies at the door now instead of just using their fists. He played them a round of Wipe Out as the last two minutes ticked down.

"See you zombies, good try, you undead pricks," Alvin called out. He suddenly realized as the clock ticked down the last minute that he actually didn't know if he would be teleported out or if he would have to leave the room on his own. He swallowed and gripped his bat in one hand and the crowbar in the other as the last few seconds ticked off the timer.

As soon as it reached 00:00, a bright light engulfed him. When his eyes cleared, he was back in his grey room with the stainless-steel toilet. Letting out a sigh of relief, he sat down on the bed. It dawned on him that his hands were empty, as well as his pockets and shirt. "Figures," he muttered.

“You survived the tutorial. Well done, that puts you into the top ten percentile,” the bored voice said by way of welcoming him back. “Now that we know your brain isn’t completely dysfunctional, we can justify taking a few minutes to get you more up to speed. I keep telling them we should wait until you get story missions unlocked, but who listens to me? No one, that’s who.”

“Sounds like bosses everywhere,” Alvin agreed. “But, since it helps me I’m not going to take your side. Who are you, anyway?”

“I’m the case worker assigned to you. You can call me Scott, and if you think about using any other name, I can be even less helpful than I currently am. Understand?”

“Scott?” Alvin asked with a snort.

“I’ve had a little over four hundred of your kind to deal with. A little insider tip, none of them survived. Now, with that out of the way, let’s walk you through the basics, shall we?”

“Sure,” Alvin replied as he got up to use the toilet. “A question, though. Do you record in this room?”

“No, this room is the limited private space you get. Does that make you feel happy?”

“Not really. Just wanted to know if my shit was going to be seen by the world.”

“If you shit while in the game, then yes, yes it will. Now, let’s start with your character screen.”

“I already figured out how to pull that up and looked over the basic stats and the abilities I have already. Who makes up the commentary on those?”

“That would be me. Did they make you laugh, because I laughed when I made them,” the bored voice had an edge of dark humor to it.

“Nope. I wonder how you know all those things, though?”

“Because I have your biographic information, from when we pasted your brain to digitize you. I know everything you did. Not much of a life, really.”

Alvin clenched his teeth for a second as his knuckles popped, he really wanted to punch this fucker. Instead he unclenched his hands and finished up on the toilet. “Glad you enjoyed it so much. Can we get on with this?”

A snicker was heard from Scott, “Of course. Next up is to check your current experience, the total is on your character screen if you want that. Or you can ask for a summary of your last mission to have it display just that.”

Alvin mentally asked for a summary, which caused a blue screen to appear before him.

Tutorial Mission Completed
Total Experience Earned: 320 XP
Breakdown: Mission completion 100 XP, Take no damage 50 XP, Search all buildings in area 150 XP, Kill two Shamblers 20 XP.

“Okay. I have a little over three hundred,” Alvin told Scott after he went over the summary.

“Not bad, you got a lot of bonuses. Now you can spend your XP. Ask for the store.”

Alvin didn’t feel like saying it out loud so he mentally asked for the store. A much bigger, cluttered screen popped up before him. “Jesus, that’s

a mess," Alvin muttered, looking at the UI for the store.

"We're still tweaking the interface design. You can reduce the list of things available to what you can afford easily enough, or you can browse the whole thing if you want. First though, look over what you can upgrade now."

Alvin reduced the list to things he could afford, which left him with a very small list. He looked at it, not impressed. "That isn't a lot to work with, is it?"

"Not for only three hundred, no, and it shouldn't be. If you wish to spend your XP now, do so. We can move on if you want more walk through right now."

"I'll spend later, let's get on with the briefing."

"Next up to discuss are the available missions. You have to take at least one mission every day until World Mode opens. Between the mandatory missions, you can do bonus missions for more XP. Ask for the job board."

"Job board," Alvin stated, causing another blue screen to appear.

"On that screen you will find the Missions available to you. Once you clear enough Basic Missions, you advance to Story Missions. This is where the fun really starts."

Scott's voice gained a trace of excitement as he continued, "Story Missions ask you to complete an actual objective instead of just surviving or killing a specific number of zombies. It might be to save someone who is being attacked, it could be to get a person to another point in the world, IE an escort mission. All missions are doable if you can figure it out and don't fuck off. Now comes the big one, once you complete a number of Story Missions, World Mode opens. Once World Mode opens, you have to do at least eight hours every day, or lose a life."

“Now the downside, you can only access the store from this room normally. In World Mode, you have to find a secure place to rest and after a few minutes you will be given the option to return here. If you do return here from World Mode you have twenty-three hours to get back in game or you lose a life. Any questions?”

“Now that was an info dump,” Alvin laughed. “The TLDR is, do missions to get XP. When World Mode opens then I have to play at least eight hours a day?”

“Yes,” Scott sounded miffed at the TLDR version. “Remember, you only start with one life.”

“One life? Does that mean I can buy more lives?”

“Yes, but they are a bit pricey,” Scott snorted.

Alvin pulled up the store and looked up the listing for extra lives. He stared at the screen for a moment then closed it. “Understatement much? A hundred grand for a life?”

“Told you they were pricey. That isn’t even the most expensive item in the store.”

Alvin didn’t take the bait as he didn’t care at the moment. “What about the gear I saw in the store? Does that go and come back with me?”

“If you have purchased it and are carrying it on your person, it will go with you. You must have it on you at the end of your mission, though, for it to return. All items can break as well, so keep that in mind.”

“Fucking durability, great,” Alvin sighed. “Okay, I get it. Is there anything else? Like maybe a way to kill things other than zombies?”

“I can’t answer that question at this time,” Scott’s voice was suddenly flatly mechanical.

“Wait, what was that? Are you a machine?”

“I am a virtual intelligence, based partially on personality traits of failed players,” Scott added with a touch of defensiveness in his voice.

“Why the mechanical voice for a second?”

“You triggered a sub-routine. It stops me from telling you about things that you aren’t permitted to know about.”

“So, there is stuff that you can’t talk about?”

“I can’t answer that question at this time,” said the same mechanical voice.

“Good to know,” Alvin replied.

“I hate it when the sub-routine triggers. Please refrain from doing so intentionally.”

“I didn’t trigger the first one intentionally,” Alvin replied. “Curious as to why you want to be called Scott though, if you’re an AI, or VI?”

“Scott was my first player. He failed during his first Story Mission. It reminds me not to expect much from any of you. I have been damned, to forever help noobs.”

Alvin laughed, “Challenge accepted. If I do get to World Mode, I want the option to change your name.”

Scott scoffed, “You will not succeed.”

“Do we have a deal?”

“What do I get out of it?” Scott asked back. “If you fail I just get another new player.”

“Can you add my personality to yours, if I fail?”

“Well yeah, but so what?” Scott replied.

“You think you’re a sarcastic ass now. Heh, you haven’t seen anything yet. I would so upgrade that side of you. So, do we have a deal?”

“I get your personality when you fail anyway. But fine, I accept your wager,” Scott replied. “Maybe it will give you some incentive to succeed.”

“Good. Time to spend my handful of XP and do another mission. I’m going to name you Betty,” Alvin told the room as he pulled up the store.

“What? You can’t change my gender orientation.”

“Not going to, just your name. Not my fault if you follow your name into being a woman, Scott.” Alvin smirked as he looked over his options in the store.

As he did he realized just how costly things were going to be. “Scott, what is a ‘Serving of Sustenance’? It costs fifty points, so I’m a little curious.”

“It is a single serving of food that will keep you full and hydrated for a full twenty-four hours. You should try it. All new players give it a go.”

Shaking his head, Alvin shelved the idea for now. He was still full from the food he’d snagged from the gas station. His eyes scanned the short list, his frown becoming more pronounced. “The only weapon I can get is a ‘worn wooden bat’. That doesn’t make me feel happy about my odds. Or I

can raise my Personability by one hundredth of a point for two hundred points."

"The formula for raising your stats, is one hundred multiplied by the whole number of the stat. Each boost you purchase is for one hundredth of a point."

"Will increasing it by that amount actually do anything for me?"

"No, but you might feel a difference at each tenth of a point. I can guarantee you will notice the difference on each whole point. Going from a three to four in Brawn for instance, is a significant difference."

"Great," Alvin sighed, as he couldn't even bump his stats right now. "Is there any stuff for this room that I can buy?"

"Yes, just not with your current point total."

Alvin fiddled with the store, setting it to a thousand-point maximum and checked it again. All of his stats were now listed. There were more melee weapons, like a metal bat, but still no ranged weapons. A 'medkit' was listed for a thousand, he tapped it to pull up the description.

"So, there's a way to fix myself if I get fucked up," Alvin mumbled. "A grand for a single use item that fully replenishes health to a single part of my body is a bit much. Oh, look, a pillow and a blanket are both on here, for five hundred each. What is this fanny pack?"

As Alvin went to tap it, Scott explained, "It gives you two slots for items to take with you and also to bring back. The bag system is one of the few ways to bring loot back with you."

"Wow, you guys hate us, don't you?"

"No, we just want it to be a challenge. Now, are you going back out?"

Alvin bought the bat he could afford, for 250 XP. “Let’s see what’s available,” he replied, pulling up the job list.

Chapter Three

As soon as he accepted the mission, Alvin was engulfed in bright white light. Blinking as the light faded, he found himself in a hotel suite that was trashed. He checked the suite carefully, but found nothing. Not a single item in the room was intact. He went to the door and listened at it for a moment. He could hear a shuffling sound in the hall that sounded like a lone zombie.

Taking a few deep breaths, Alvin gripped the bat tightly in his right hand as his left touched the knob. Turning it gently, the gentle click of the catch retracting sounded loud to Alvin as he slowly opened the door.

The hallway was lit by the window at the end of the hall, along with light spilling in from a few open doors along the hall. At the far end of the hall near the stairwell was a single zombie. It turned around as Alvin watched it.

Stepping into the hall, Alvin saw the room he exited from was next to the elevators. A second hall stretched out on the other side of the elevators. Luckily, no other zombies were in sight. His mission was to kill five zombies, he hoped to take them one at a time. His hand felt a little damp on the bat as the zombie started to shamble towards him.

"Batter up," Alvin muttered as he turned to face the oncoming zombie, putting his other hand on the bat. He brought the bat up, planning on bringing it down right on top of the zombie's head. "Head shot or go home."

The zombie's out stretched hands made small grasping gestures as it closed in. Alvin waited until it was in range, then brought his arms down

hard with everything he had, knowing if he failed he would be zombie chow.

The sound of a wood bat breaking a skull is unpleasant to hear, at least the first time. The splatter of blood is even more unpleasant to see. An eye popping out of the zombie's head was the final, grotesque touch. The zombie dropped like a marionette with its strings cut, just as the previous dead zombies had. He felt his bile rise, but this time didn't puke.

"Glad I stopped doing that." He frowned for a moment, "Four more. You can do this, Al," he said, giving himself a pep talk, as he went to leave the suite.

A groan was all the warning he got from the zombie that lurched into the doorway just as he got close. Acting on reflex Alvin brought the bat around, solidly striking the chest of his attacker. Unfortunately, all it did was push the zombie back a few steps. Alvin backpedaled to get some room, which let him avoid being grabbed as the zombie lurched forward again.

A hard swing left to right crushed the skull of the zombie, sending blood and a small piece of skull flying across the wall. Panting, Alvin watched the body fall lifeless, as his heart jackhammered easily over a hundred beats a minute. Hands shaking on the bat, he stood there waiting for the next zombie but a few minutes went by without another incident.

His heart slowed and he felt drained from the close encounter. Slumping to his knees for a few minutes, Alvin looked at the bloody bat, then at the corpse a few feet from him. "Well, guess the cops might have been right about me. It seems I do kill people, or at least dead people."

After a bit, Alvin pushed himself to his feet. He still needed to kill three more zombies to get the mission done and he wasn't doing himself any favors by staying here. He checked the open doorways, but all the rooms were as trashed as his starting room had been. He went down both halls opening each door, but no more zombies appeared on this level.

The elevators didn't have power so he went to the stairwell. He pushed the door open and listened as the sound echoed up and down the well. A single groan could be heard followed by the sound of feet coming down the stairs. Backing up, Alvin got ready to kill the zombie as it came through the door.

A minute later a zombie came through the door only to have its head cracked open as the bat came down. Alvin swallowed the bile in his mouth as a small fragment of skull hit him in the cheek. He looked down at the zombie, feeling a little less sick about this one. Around one arm was a band just above the elbow with a needle that looked to be broken at the joint. "Guess the cops were right again, drugs do kill." He scrubbed the splatter of blood from the skull fragment away.

He stepped over the body into the stairwell. This time no sounds came to him. He dithered for a minute, on whether to go up or down before he decided on down. He was sure that if he felt suicidal he could go out into the city. He'd seen it through the suite's window, and he was sure he would find plenty of zombies there.

He wound up finding the last two zombies before he got to the ground floor. Neither surprised him, so he was easily able to kill them. As soon as the fifth zombie died the light washed over him and he found himself back in his room. No blood could be seen on either him or the bat. "Huh, easy cleaning service at least."

"Yes, but it doesn't repair damaged items," Scott chimed in. "I see you survived, which is helping make your case that you might not be a complete waste of time."

"Glad you agree," Alvin muttered as he pulled up the summary for completing the easy mission.

Kill Mission Completed
Total Experience Earned: 150 XP

Breakdown: Mission completion 50 XP, Take no damage 50 XP, Killing five Shamblers 50 XP.

Sighing Alvin looked at his now total experience of 220. “Well, this is going to take for fucking ever.”

“This is to help weed out the chaff from the wheat as an old saying goes. We want only those who are worth a damn doing World Mode.”

“Yeah, this kind of feels like being threshed,” Alvin replied. “Okay. Once more into the breach.” He pulled up the job board again to look over his two choices of Basic Missions; survive or kill.

He completed another kill mission without incident and netted another 150 XP. His stomach rumbled as he was about to take another mission. He paused and considered his options.

“Hey Scott, do the survive missions always have food in them?”

“No, but it is much more likely than a kill mission having food.”

Opening up the store he noted his meager 370 XP, which could net him a sub sandwich and a bottle of water for close to two hundred points. Shaking his head, he purchased a ‘Serving of Sustenance’. A bowl with a spoon appeared in the middle of his floor. He picked it up and looked dubiously at the greyish sludge in the bowl.

“What the fuck is this?”

“Sustenance,” Scott replied with a snicker, “eat up.”

Alvin picked up some on the spoon, sniffing at it. It had no scent that he could discern. Tentatively he stuck the spoon in his mouth, letting the sludge like stuff hit his tongue. Lukewarm wet cardboard is what it tasted like. He swallowed quickly to get it off his tongue. It slid down his throat like watery glue, not fast, but not sticking as he swallowed.

“Blargh, this is horrible,” Alvin spat.

“Yes, that is the intent,” Scott replied with a smug voice. “It is designed to keep you going but also to be repulsive. After all, wouldn’t a sandwich and water be so much better?”

“You guys are assholes. Major assholes,” Alvin grunted before he took another bite.

“Your complaint has been passed along,” Scott snickered. “Yum, yum. Eat up.”

Alvin felt his jaw twitch as he took bite after bite. He hoped Story Missions wouldn’t be too far away, as he really needed to get XP faster.

“Are you recording all my adventures?” Alvin asked between bites. “Do they get replayed later when I’m asleep?”

“Video on demand. We also do a highlights reel, which for you right now is drumming and throwing up. Good job with getting over that, by the way.”

“Ass,” Alvin muttered as he took the last bite. As he swallowed the last of the sludge the bowl and spoon vanished. He also felt sated, like he’d eaten a substantial meal. “That is so wrong.”

He used the john before he got ready and took his next two kill missions back to back. His two missions put him in a casino for one and an empty supermarket for the other. He had been able to kite the zombies during both missions to get the kills.

Alvin looked at his slab to sleep on, then checked his XP total, finding it at 610. He wanted a pillow but wasn’t going to waste 500 XP on one right now. He was close to getting the fanny pack, which he felt would be really handy come Story Missions. He would need to get another bowl of

sludge tomorrow, as well. He looked at his bat. It was showing signs of wear from repeatedly cracking skulls.

“Fuck,” he sighed. “Scott, you guys suck. My bat might last another mission or two but that will be it. So, I can either get another worn bat or the metal one for 600 XP.”

“Choices, choices,” Scott half taunted him. “Isn’t choice one of those big things that you humans harp on about?”

“Asshole,” Alvin sighed before he stripped off his shirt and pants. He stuck the jeans into the shirt then lay down on the bunk using his clothes as a pillow, an old jail trick. “See you when I wake up, prick.”

The light in the room dimmed as he lay down. “Night, princess,” Scott replied with a snicker.

Chapter Four

Alvin woke slowly, his body aching from a night of restless sleep. Sitting up with a groan, he blinked at the grey room, as the memory of his last day washed over him. He twisted his head side to side, his vertebra popping lightly. Shaking his head at the insanity of his situation, he reached back and pulled his clothes over to him.

"Maybe a pillow is worth the investment. A mattress would be nice too, maybe a sheet." Alvin muttered as he got his clothes on.

"You sure are perky in the morning, ain't cha?" Scott snickered. "You going to do a survival mission today?"

"No, today I'm going to grind the kill missions. They aren't hard and it's pretty much a guaranteed value. If I go through a half-dozen of them, I'll be ahead enough to pick up some of the stuff I want without risking myself too much."

"Coward," Scott scoffed.

"I'd rather be a live coward than a dead fool," Alvin replied as he checked the bat by the bed. It was missing small pieces and didn't look like it was going to last much longer. He hoped it would hold out for at least one more mission.

"Let's go to work," Alvin said with no cheer as he pulled up the job board.

For the next five hours he did kill missions, one after the other. On the fifth mission, his bat snapped on the last zombie. The handle vanished

from his hand as he appeared back in his home. “Well, at least I got all I could out of it.”

“Are you tired of this tedium yet?” Scott asked with a sigh.

“Pretty much. I now know the wood bat can go through about fifty skulls before it fails. Let me see what the job board has to offer, then I’ll grab another bat and head out again.” Alvin replied as he pulled up the job board. His eyes widened slightly and his mouth stretched into a smile. “Oh yes, we are finally done with that.”

He pulled up the store, purchasing the fanny pack, a worn wooden bat and lastly a serving of sustenance. He sat down as he suffered through the sludge, he wanted to make sure he was good to go just in case the mission took longer to complete.

“That is a lot of expenditure,” Scott opined as Alvin stuffed his face.

“Leaves me with seventy XP,” Alvin replied as he finished off the last of the bowl. “It should be worth it though. Story Missions just opened up.”

“Already?” Scott asked, a little puzzled.

Alvin snickered. “This will be way more entertaining now.”

“Yeah,” Scott replied his voice a touch subdued. “Nice knowing you.”

“I ain’t going to die yet,” Alvin rebuffed Scott. “Going to test the waters with a Story Mission.”

“My namesake died on his first Story Mission,” Scott’s voice held a tinge of regret.

“Ah. I take it that you kind of liked Scott, before he up and died?”

“He was the one who went the furthest with me as his case worker,” Scott replied. “The best so far is the guy being overseen by Felicia, he has…” Scott’s voice went mechanical for a moment, “That information is restricted at this time.”

“You tripped yourself,” Alvin told Scott.

“Yeah. Go on and try not to die like the noob you are.”

“Heh, noob? I think not. I did the right thing, you just wait and see. Be back soonish, I hope,” Alvin said as he tapped the Story Mission icon on the job board.

The light flared around him, when it faded he was in a lightly wooded area with the full moon shining down on him. In the distance, he could make out a bonfire with some people around it. Gripping his new bat firmly, he headed that way as a pop-up appeared before him.

Story Mission: Undead Party Crashers.
You must keep Penny safe while you kill all the zombies in the campground.
(Try not to party until you drop.)

As he read the pop-up, a commotion broke out from around the fire. Three voices were raised as they argued over something. He took off running for them, hoping that one of them was the woman he needed to save.

He had just gotten into view of the three by the fire. Two women and one guy were having an argument about what the news program on the radio had been talking about, some kind of broadcast by the Pope.

One of the women screamed as she spotted a number of zombies shuffling at them from the far side of the fire. Obviously very old corpses, they were mostly bones with jerky-like skin and dried muscle visible in

places, not the embalmed bodies one would expect from recently buried corpses.

The sole guy of the trio grabbed a branch from the woodpile they had for the bonfire. “Run for the cabin, I’ll hold them off.”

Alvin shook his head and followed after the women as they ran. As the two women neared the cabins, a single scream could be heard from them. A guy with deep wounds on his face came stumbling out of one of them, the door slamming shut behind him.

The women stopped dead, allowing Alvin to catch up to them. “There is no safe place,” Alvin panted as he stopped a few feet behind them. The women screamed and spun on him, prompting Alvin to hold up his free hand. “I’m not a zombie, I just want to survive.”

“Who are you?” one of the women asked with wide, wild eyes as she looked back at the guy who had fallen to the ground.

“Call me Al. Which one of you is Penny?”

“Why?” asked the other, as she glanced from his bat to the cabins. Her British accent was clipped and precise.

“I was sent to save a Penny,” Alvin said as the door to the nearest cabin shattered and a zombie pushed through it. “Hold that thought, please.” He stepped past the women and cracked the skull of the zombie that had shuffled out.

“You… can kill them?” the first woman asked, before she fainted at the sight and smell of the zombie being killed.

The second one puked as Alvin looked back at them, “Bad time for this.” Sighing, he went to check on the fainter. He slapped her face gently, “Hey, wake up.”

“Don’t hit her,” snapped the other one who was scrubbing at her mouth.

“Just waking her up and which one of you is Penny?”

“She is, I’m Velma. Why does that matter?”

“I was tasked with saving Penny and killing the zombies,” Alvin said as he picked Penny up with both arms, grunting as he did. Carrying close to two hundred pounds of dead weight is hard work. “That cabin is okay for the moment. We can use it briefly.” He started to move with Penny in his arms.

“Hey, wait a minute! You can’t just take her,” Velma yelled.

“Watch me,” Alvin grunted as he went past the bodies on the ground.

“I’m talking to you, asshole,” Velma screamed as she started after him. A scared scream came from her a second later as the guy with the ruined face twitched and started to get up. “Oh, my, god!”

Sighing, Alvin set Penny down wincing as his back protested when he stood back up. He took two steps and smashed the skull of the new zombie. The blood splashed over Velma, who was standing there, frozen.

“Come with or stay here, it’s your choice. I only need to save her. You can be a bonus or extra XP, I don’t care which.” Alvin told her coldly as he picked Penny back up. Another scream, this one male came from back by the bonfire. “I guess he just got killed, which means I’m your last bet, Velma.”

Seemingly in a daze, Velma followed as Alvin walked into the ruined cabin. Though the power was off, a faint light was emanating from the cabin Alvin entered even as his back twinged under the weight he

carried. Staggering past the broken door, he was able to make it to the queen-sized bed, dropping Penny onto it. His muscles spasmed as he stood fully upright again, as he had been slightly hunched to carry her. “I either need to get stronger or she needs to lose some weight.”

“We should help George,” Velma said, her voice slow and fuzzy.

“He died, didn’t you hear the scream?” Alvin said as he twisted his body side to side. He found the source of the light, a big square flashlight that used a six-volt battery, pointed at the rear wall on the ground. He glanced at Velma, who was slumped by the door her eyes unfocused, before he headed into the bathroom. A minute of searching turned up what he wanted, painkillers. He downed four ibuprofen with the help of an open bottle of water on the counter. He didn’t find anything else worthwhile in the bathroom so he went back to the main room after putting the meds in his fanny pack.

Velma was still by the door shaking her head, obviously suffering from post-traumatic stress and dissociating. Alvin quickly searched the dressers and suitcase, but nothing of use was to be had. “Well, fuck. Guess we do it the hard way,” he muttered as he crossed to Penny. He shook her hard and after a second her eyes fluttered open. “Penny, you back with us now?”

“Hmm? What happened? Who are you?” Her accent was strongly evident as she spoke.

“The guy who saved you. Look, this is going to be hard for you to accept, but zombies ate your boy-toy and are coming this way. You have only one option to get through this night alive, and that is to stay with me and do everything I tell you.”

Penny sat up, looking at his blood-stained clothes then over at Velma who was also gore covered. “What happened to Velma? Where are we?”

“Broken cabin that the fat guy got chased out of by the zombie. Velma is having issues dealing with reality. Now, can you cope or are you going to be dead weight?”

Penny slid out of the bed, away from Alvin, “Look, I don’t know who you are but George will be here soon to help, okay? He was by the bon…”

Alvin sighed as he watched her remember the zombies and George telling them to run. “Earth, or what’s left of it, to Penny, come in Penny. George died while you were out cold. You wrenched the muscles in my back to carry your useless ass in here. Now, can you cope or are you going to cost me this mission?”

Penny looked back at Alvin, her eyes slightly unfocused, “Mission?”

“I have to save you from being eaten by the zombies, and I have to kill all of them in the campground area. Do you know why there are some very dead zombies here?”

“The campground is said to have an old graveyard from the early nineteen hundreds. The family that owned the area’s ancestors, it’s said to be fourteen people buried there. Why me? Why do you have to save me?”

“That was what the fuckers who sent me here gave me as a mission. Okay, so fifteen dead, plus whoever else has been killed like the fat guy. Besides your group, how many others are staying here?”

“Just Brent with his wife and son,” Penny replied before she sat on the bed. “We’re not going to survive, are we?” her voice was low and harsh.

“I’m going to survive and if you can keep yourself from being an idiot and listen to me you can too. Maybe even Velma can, but I wouldn’t count on that as she seems to have given up.”

“What do you need me to do?” Penny asked looking up, her eyes glassy.

Rubbing his head, Alvin wanted to scream. This whole mission seemed fucked. “Just stay as quiet as you can and wait here for a minute,” he stepped past Velma and outside.

He could make out the zombies by the bonfire milling around without a target to fixate on. Scanning the area around the cabins, he didn’t spot any movement so he went to the cabin next door and tried the knob. It opened right up, so he slipped inside, wishing he had brought the flashlight with him, but if he had the women probably would have freaked. No sound from the interior so he entered into the main room. The curtain was open, allowing moonlight to spill into the room.

It seemed empty so he checked the bathroom and under the bed. Nothing to be seen, so he closed the curtains and slipped back out. As he went back towards the other cabin, movement between them caught his eye. A zombie lurched forward, snagging his shirt sleeve, just missing his arm. “Fuck!” Alvin cussed as he brought the bat down hard on the zombie’s head. The angle was bad so instead of dying, the zombie staggered back a step. He brought the bat down again now that there was more room, breaking the skull and killing it.

Panting, Alvin looked back at the bonfire. The zombies had heard him and began to shuffle his way. He ran for the other cabin to find Penny rocking Velma by the door, with the flashlight in her grasp. “Get up. We need to get you into the other cabin with the door shut.”

“What about Velma?” Penny asked looking up, tears falling from her eyes. “She seems broken? What happened to her?”

“You get to the cabin,” Alvin told Penny, giving her a gentle nudge out the door while dragging Velma to her feet. “I’ll bring Velma.”

Penny stumbled towards the cabin he had just came from, while Alvin dealt with the mostly unresponsive Velma. He herded her towards the

cabin roughly as he kept glancing at the zombies approaching them. He pushed Velma inside with Penny, “Lock the door, not that it will stop them for long, but it might slow them down. Stay quiet in there and they might not come after you. No matter what, do not open this door until the sun comes up.” He shut the door before turning to face the oncoming horde.

He walked towards the zombies, a couple were well ahead of the rest. As he approached he angled to the side so he had one zombie to worry about. He bashed its skull open then turned on the other one, quickly dispatching it as well. He jogged at an angle away from the cabins. He glanced back to see the zombies following him. Letting out a sigh of relief he began to play ring around the rosy with them. He would lead them around until he could get one slightly separated from the others, then he would dart in to brain it before doing it all over again.

An hour later the zombies were all dead and his back was a pulsing, throbbing ache. He headed back towards the cabin, dry swallowing some more ibuprofen and wondering why the game hadn’t teleported him yet. As he neared the cabin he made out a small figure banging on the door to the cabin Penny was in. He recalled her saying that a child had been in the campground when the zombies started attacking. He slowed a second, shocked by the fact that a child could become a zombie as well. As he slowed, the door to the cabin opened showing the silhouette of a woman. The zombie child lurched forward and started chewing her leg, and the woman started screaming, staggering back from the door.

“Fuck me,” Alvin spat as he sprinted for the cabin.

The zombie grabbed the yelling woman as it ravaged the leg. The woman flailed and kicked at the child but couldn’t seem to hurt it. As Alvin got closer he heard Penny yell, “Velma!”

Alvin brought the bat down hard on the child, pulping the skull and brain as Velma collapsed. Blood spurted from the severed artery in her thigh where the zombie had bitten her. Penny ripped her shirt off and tried to stop the bleeding.

“Stay with me, Velma,” Penny yelled hysterically. “Stay with me, it will be okay. George will be back soon and then we can leave. Okay?”

“She’s dead,” Alvin cut in. “She’s going to turn shortly. You need to back away from her.”

Penny looked up, her eyes wild, “Fuck you, this is all your fault. The zombies weren’t here until you showed up.”

Alvin shook his head once before he kicked Penny hard in the chest, which shoved her away from Velma’s corpse. A second after that, two hands grabbed his ankle as Velma began to move again. He stepped down hard onto the new zombie’s pelvis as he swung the bat, golf style, at the rising head of the zombie. Blood splattered the door frame as Velma’s body again collapsed. He was panting as he stared down at the body.

“What!? Why!? You killed Velma!” Penny cried, huddling into a ball.

“The human race is doomed, if this is any example of what’s going to happen,” Alvin muttered just before the light enveloped him.

When it cleared, he was back in his grey room. He collapsed onto his bunk. “Well, the Story Missions can be a little intense. How did I do, Scott?”

“You completed the objective and survived,” Scott replied, his tone clearly giving away his shock. “I don’t get why you kicked Penny, though?”

“Because the dumb bitch was going to get her throat ripped out by zombie Velma. Please tell me not everyone I meet in that game is going to be that useless.”

“People are people where ever you go,” Scott intoned, as if it were a quote.

With a snort, Alvin lay back on the bunk and pulled up the summary for the mission. A smile crossed his face as he looked at the XP gained. “Well, this is more profitable at least. Okay. I’ll rest for a minute, because the adrenaline dump is real. Then back into the fray again.”

Mission Summary: Story Mission Successfully Completed.
Total Experience Earned: 600 XP
Breakdown: Story Success 400 XP, Shamblers killed 190 XP, Loot bonus 10 XP.

Alvin examined his bat, which was still looking okay so he didn’t feel the need to buy a new one. After a few minutes of lying there he went to get up, only to have his back scream in protest. Grunting, he forced himself to his feet and began to stretch his back.

“Back muscles sore?” Scott asked.

“I don’t know how much Penny weighed, but it was easily over a buck fifty,” Alvin replied as he continued to try to get his back loose again.

“You survived and completed your first Story Mission. Are you going to do another one?”

“That’s the plan. That Story Mission was basically the same as doing five of the Basic Missions. Sure, it was a little harder, but it was worth it.” Alvin pulled up the store next and looked over his options before closing it out again. He pursed his lips as he considered the next few items that he wanted to purchase. “Okay Scott, heading back out. Wish me luck?”

“Don’t die,” was Scott’s reply as Alvin tapped the Story Mission on the job board.

“That was so encouraging,” Alvin was able to say as the light enveloped him again.

Chapter Five

When the light cleared, he was standing in front of a mobile home in the middle of what appeared to be a well maintained mobile home park. He could hear sirens going, screams from people and even the sound of gunshots. He checked his mission so he would know what he had to do.

Story Mission: Elderly Issues.
You must keep Grandma Terry safe from harm as you get her to the front gate, where her grandson will be waiting for her.
(Why do old women always walk so slow?)

Swiping the pop-up away, Alvin looked at the trailer before him where someone had painted the name of the owner next to the number of the unit. Terry Giardino was painted in rainbow colors next to her unit number, 196.

Alvin went to the door and knocked, “Mrs. Giardino?”

“Go away, you hoodlum! My grandson will be here in a minute and he will arrest you if you’re not gone.” The voice of the elderly woman from within the home carried the slightest hint of an Italian accent.

“Ma’am, your grandson sent me to escort you out of here. He is trying to keep the front cleared so you can leave safely.”

“Oh? You think I’m that dumb? What is his name?”

“I didn’t get his name ma’am, only the fact that he’s a cop and should be respected,” Alvin hedged based on the arrested remark.

“He’s a good boy. You stay there. I want to get my things before I go and if I don’t like the way you look I won’t be going.”

Alvin sighed deeply, restraining the urge to face palm. “Please try to hurry, ma’am. The zombies will be here soon.”

“Bah, zombies, no one believes those tales. You just wait there.” He could hear her moving about inside.

Alvin really wished he had a set of lock picks with him, then he could just pick the lock and go in. Instead, he waited as patiently as he could. He was sure that if he forced entry into the home then the old woman wouldn’t listen to him. As he waited he kept an eye on the area. The sun was up, thankfully, so he had good visibility on this small cul-de-sac. He did notice a lack of motorized vehicles in the four driveways in the cul-de-sac and silently cursed the game for not giving him an easy win.

“Okay, back away from the door,” Terry told him from inside.

Alvin backed up so he was on the street as the old lady came out of the home. She had a bag on her back and was carrying a guitar case. “Let me lock up and we can go. I don’t know why James sent you, but he must have had his reasons,” Terry told him.

Alvin repressed the urge to explain that locking her door was pointless. His hands twitched as he waited for her, wishing there was some way to hurry her along. A moment later she had locked her door and joined him on the street.

“Ma’am, it would be good if you could give me directions to the gate,” Alvin said.

She eyed him with suspicion, “I thought you came from the gate?”

“I was in a hurry and don’t remember the way back,” Alvin lied. “I was too busy killing zombies to take real note.”

“Bah, zombies again. Zombies aren’t real. It’s just people looting like they always do during riots.” She started off down the street, not quite at a crawl, but a slow measured pace.

Alvin sighed, wondering why escort quests always walked so damn slow. He chose not to argue with her idea that zombies weren’t real. If he was lucky, they wouldn’t encounter any.

As they left the cul-de-sac, the door of the home just in front of them burst open. An old guy wearing a plaid bathrobe rushed out. “Terry! Did you hear the news? They say zombies have been seen downtown.”

“You’re a fool, Jerry. Zombies ain’t real. Go back to drinking, you drunkard,” With that Terry marched past him, a scowl firmly on her face.

Alvin grinned at Jerry as he went by, “Zombies are real, Jerry. Might want to get your stuff and get out of the city.”

Jerry just stared at him, “Who are you? How did you get in here?”

Alvin just shook his head as he went by. Humanity was so dense. A zombie apocalypse was going on and yet people still refused to do the smart thing. Alvin frowned to himself, realizing that he was finding it harder to view the people here as simple NPCs.

“Hurry it up, or I’ll leave you behind,” Terry said from a few steps ahead of him.

“You couldn’t outpace me if you tried,” Alvin replied as he took a few fast paces to walk beside her. “Why are we walking instead of moving faster, by the way?”

“Why should I hurry? I’ve lived for seventy-eight years, I’ve seen too many riots to get worked up over another one. Though this one sounds pretty bad, don’t hear gunshots normally.”

As Alvin was about to reply another person came stumbling out of the mobile home to their left. Alvin looked over to see the dead eyes of the intact zombie as it stumbled down the two steps to the street.

“Fuck,” Alvin cussed as he stepped around Terry and brought his bat up to brain it.

“Edith? Are you okay?” Terry asked then back away as Alvin raised his bat. “What are you doing?”

A groan came from dead Edith as it shambled forward a step. Its hands made grasping motions as it came.

“Edith is dead. That’s a zombie and I’m going to brain it,” Alvin replied as he waited for it to close the next few feet.

“She isn’t dead,” Terry retorted but her voice sounded unsure. “She’s just having an episode of some kind. We can call for the medics.”

Alvin gripped the bat tighter, “Nope, she’s a zombie.”

“But she isn’t dead, she doesn’t have any wounds on her, she wasn’t bitten,” Terry said, her voice quavering the tiniest bit.

“I’ve put down zombies a hundred years old that got up out of the ground. You don’t have to be bit to be a zombie.” Alvin grunted as he swung the bat, braining Edith, the blood splattered onto the pavement.

The sound of Terry being sick behind him brought him around. Terry was hunched over the shrubbery of the mobile home she was next to, emptying her stomach. Alvin waited for her to finish even as he wished for a bottle of water. After a minute Terry stood up and pulled a bottle of water from her bag to wash her mouth out.

“This can’t be real,” Terry muttered as she closed the bottle. “Zombies ain’t real.”

“They are now,” Alvin replied. “We need to get moving, your grandson is waiting. He’s holding the front gate so people can escape.”

Terry looked back at him, her mouth set in a hard line. “Right, no more pussyfooting then. Keep up with me, boy.” She took off at a jog, which caught Alvin at a loss for a second before he took off after her.

He caught up to her and they jogged down the road. Terry seemed to be struggling after a hundred yards. “Drop the excess baggage,” Alvin told her.

“Not happening,” Terry wheezed. “It belongs to James. He will want it.”

Alvin was about to retort when three zombies came around the corner in front of them. He grabbed Terry, stopping her as her head was down. “Hold up there Gran, we have company. Stay back and let me handle them.”

Terry panted as she stopped and took another drink of water. Alvin stepped forward, the zombies turning toward him at his voice. “Hey, batter batter,” Alvin quipped as he looked over the shambling threesome. He couldn’t run them around with Terry so close by, so he needed to kill one quickly then figure out how to get room between the other two.

“Can you take three?” Terry asked as she began to catch her breath. “I can take one,” she added, pulling a Maglite from her bag.

“You are a last resort. I have to get you to James safely,” Alvin replied as he stepped forward to kill the first zombie. His swing was on target and the first zombie fell, with the same sickening crunch he was growing used to. He sidestepped quickly as the other two lunged for him, just missing him.

He backed up, looking for an opening, but the duo stayed right next to each other. “I really don’t want to get bit,” Alvin spat as he kept backing up.

Terry threw her empty bottle at the zombies, striking one of them in the head. “Hey Frank, you asshole, over here. I always knew you were useless.”

Alvin blinked as he heard Terry taunt one of the zombies. “What the fuck are you doing?” The zombie Terry had pelted turned at her provocation, starting towards her.

“Giving you room, now hurry it up. James is waiting,” Terry replied in a level tone.

Laughing, Alvin stepped forward and crushed the zombie in front of him before taking the few steps to kill the one that had turned on Terry. “Well, thanks for the assist. You’re fucking nuts, but I think I like you.”

“Sure, and if I was even still 68 instead of 78, I would be showing you how it’s done.” Terry started walking again for the front gate. “Can’t jog any more, my heart just won’t take it. I took my meds though, so I should be okay as long as I don’t run again.”

Alvin fell into step with her, “Understood, ma’am. Can I just say thanks? You are already way more useful than the last person I tried to help. All she did was pass out, then blubber about how it couldn’t be happening.”

Terry gave a snort, “Probably one of those useless college kids. So soft and lazy, wanting people to do everything for them. Back in my day we did for ourselves.”

“What year were you born?” Alvin asked.

“Nineteen twenty-two,” Terry replied.

Alvin stopped walking for a second as he did the math. “Wait, it’s the millennium?”

“Of course it is,” Terry replied giving him an odd look. “What year did you think it was?”

“Sorry, been killing zombies so much my sense of time is off,” Alvin lied.

“Killing zombies is nothing. Try being chased by the neighborhood kids because you’re Italian. They chased me all the way home, taunting me about being Mussolini’s daughter. If my father hadn’t been on the porch they might have caught me, too.”

Alvin shook his head, “Wow, so World War Two was during your younger years.”

“It was bad,” Terry replied. “Maybe this is worse, though. At least in a war the other guys wear uniforms.”

“True enough,” Alvin replied as they kept walking.

They killed another ten zombies before they reached the main gate. An old car was idling in front of the gate as a twenty-something man was manually opening the gate. “Gran!” the young man shouted as he paused in opening the gate. “I was just coming to save you.”

“James,” Terry smiled as she squeezed through the opening. “Your friend here saved me and got me to you.”

James looked up at Alvin, his eyes sharp, “Who are you?”

“Just a passerby. You get her to safety. She is an amazing woman and good luck with the zombies.” Alvin replied just before the light swallowed him, returning him to his room.

Mission Summary: Story Mission Successfully Completed.
Total Experience Earned: 550 XP
Breakdown: Story Success 320 XP, Shamblers killed 130 XP, Take no damage Bonus 100 XP.

"Scott, why didn't you tell me the zombie game was set in 2000 A.D.?" Alvin asked as his eyes cleared.

"You never asked," was the reply.

"Okay. Better question, who came up with the quirky grandma with the silly back story?"

"It is based on one of our employee's ancestors. Her story about being chased is completely factual, weird but true," Scott told him.

"Weird is right. Well, seems I'm doing good with Story Missions. Let's see what my current total is now. A little over a grand, and I'm going to need a new weapon soon. Maybe I should take the metal bat. This bat should last through my next mission, so maybe I should wait."

"You're going to do a third one today?" Scott asked, clearly shocked.

"Yup, at least one more. I need to save up and get a firearm to make this easier."

"Those are a bit expensive, at the start of the game," Scott told him.

"Yeah, which is why I want one before I reach World Mode."

Alvin took a couple of ibuprofen and downed them with the stale tasting water from the sink attached to the stainless-steel fixture in his room. "Okay. Wish me luck?"

"Don't die," Scott dead panned.

“Ah, my own personal sarcasm-bot,” Alvin laughed as the light enveloped him once more as he started his next mission.

Chapter Six

Alvin blinked as the light cleared, finding himself in the parking lot of a high school. Independence High had a lion as the mascot, painted in bold colors on the side of the gymnasium. It also had a zombie issue, as Alvin could make out a few undead going through the shattered doors at the front of the building. His mission pop-up appeared as he took in the scene.

Story Mission: Undead High.
Save as many teens as you can from the zombies.
(School days are here again? This is a closed environment for you, until all teens have either fled the school or died you can't leave the grounds.)

Alvin paused, considering the mission before dismissing the pop-up. He had no reason to be reckless. Find a small group that would listen and everything would be fine. He walked towards the gym, hoping that it hadn't been swarmed yet. As he got closer he heard screams from inside. The zombies had beaten him there apparently.

Just as he reached the door it banged open, as a dozen kids ran by him in gym clothes screaming. A step behind them came a zombie which Alvin brained with a practiced swing, sending blood flying against the doors it came through. He looked inside to see another dozen zombies. Some were busy chewing on people, while others were staggering after more students. He walked through the door, breaking the skull of a zombie that had torn the throat out of the over muscled teacher it was eating, then he crushed the skull of the teacher as well. Another teen went by him with crazed eyes, straight out the door without even glancing at Alvin.

"You're welcome," Alvin told the fleeing teen before he turned back to the gym floor which had a lot of blood on it now. The remaining original zombies had finished chewing on their first victims as the victims started to twitch to life. Alvin noted that each of the new zombies all had lethal

wounds. “Maybe they want the blood?” Alvin muttered as he tried to make sense out of what he was seeing.

“Help us! Mister, help!” came the cry of a panicked female from the second level of the gym.

Alvin looked up and over to the far side of the gym, where a good twenty kids were on the second floor. Alvin glanced at the zombies, shambling toward the door to the locker room right under that level. If it was anything like the schools he had attended, the small hall to the locker room held a set of stairs up to the second level, and it was the only way down or up. “You’re all going to have to jump,” Alvin said, heading that direction and braining the trailing zombie as he went.

“Open the bleachers,” the girl shouted, pointing to the mechanism that lowered or raised the bleachers that were accordioned to the wall. “Hurry!”

Alvin brained another zombie as he went to the mechanism. “Be ready to go,” he said and tripped the switch. It didn’t budge. Alvin finally realized that the only light in the gym was from the glass that covered the second story of the gym. “No power,” he called, killing another zombie with a left-handed swing.

“Use the chain then,” the girl screamed at him. The sound of something beating on the door to the second level started.

Alvin had to brain yet another zombie before he grabbed the chain next to him and began to manually lower the bleachers. The sound echoed through the gymnasium as the metal stands began to lower and spread forward. He got them about half deployed when the door on the second floor gave way. “No more time, you have to jump,” Alvin told the girl, who screamed at the people behind her. Alvin went to the locker room door in time to catch another zombie in the head. “I’ll hold the door, hurry.”

He heard people screaming and some thumps as people jumped behind him while he killed another zombie. He killed two more before he

got yelled at again, right after an agonizing scream. “Mister, help, Fred broke his ankle.”

Alvin turned his head to see a chubby brown-haired girl crouched next to a good looking blonde guy who was on the ground holding his ankle in pain. “You have to help him, I’m killing zombies,” Alvin replied, turning back to kill another zombie as it stumbled over the bodies of the ones he had previously killed.

“Come on, Doris, we need to go,” another voice called from the doorway that everyone had fled through.

“I can’t leave without Fred,” Doris yelled back. “He loves me.”

“No, he doesn’t. He’s only using you for help with his homework and easy sex,” the guy yelled at her from the door. “Either come on or I’m leaving you here.”

Doris looked down at Fred, who was focused on his ankle which was very swollen and discolored above his sneaker. “Fred, come on. We have to go,” Doris pleaded with him as she gave his arm a gentle tug.

“Fuck off, you fat bitch. I need some crutches, go find me some.” He shoved her away with a snarl.

Rapid footsteps made Alvin look behind him, he saw the guy from the door running over to kick Fred in the head, hard. “You useless dickhead! Doris was only trying to help you!” With another kick he spun to Doris, who was watching with wide eyes. He dragged her toward the door. “Come on, Doris. We need to get out of here.”

“O…kay,” Doris said, her eyes looking a bit distant as the other guy towed her along behind him.

“Kids,” Alvin muttered. He didn’t see any more zombies moving in the locker room. He glanced at Fred, whose head lay at a very bad angle. Broken neck, Alvin figured, so he broke Fred’s skull open just in case. A

loud thud pulled his head around. A zombie had fallen over the railing to the gym floor, breaking its own head open. “Heh, now that is funny,” Alvin muttered as he left the gym to go further into the school. “Let’s go find the rest of them.”

The school had emergency lights, probably run by a generator that was functioning. One out of four lights were functioning, which was good because the interior of the school would have been dark as hell otherwise. Bodies littered the hall, making Alvin pause at the door. Some had their heads cracked open. Others hadn’t and were beginning to twitch. It looked like someone had at least attempted to fight back. Stepping in slowly, Alvin went through the messy process of breaking every skull that wasn’t already broken. A few of them managed to stand up and shamble toward him. Pausing to kill them slowed him down, which unfortunately gave him plenty of time to look around.

Some of the zombies looked like students that had been trampled to death. The majority sported torn necks or had their chests caved in as if they had been hit with a very heavy weight. What he didn’t hear as he methodically worked through the main hall were signs of people still alive. Someone was at least still in the school though, since he hadn’t been teleported away. As he wondered what he should do to find them, a sharp report echoed from down the hall followed by a cloud of smoke.

Alvin advanced, noting that more of the bodies here had been brained so he just touched up the ones who hadn’t been. When he got down the hall he found the offshoot where the noise and smoke had come from. Pieces of bodies littered the hall, as well as a dozen zombies now pressing in on a mostly shattered door. He heard people yelling from inside the door the zombies were pushing on. With quick steps, Alvin caught the back of the pack and began to lay into them.

“Don’t set off any more bombs!” he yelled as he brained his next target, his arms starting to ache from the exertion of his day’s work.

“Is someone out there?” The voice on the other side of the doors was male. “Did the first bomb work?”

“Hang on, got a dozen zombies to kill,” Alvin yelled as he brained the next one.

“We can take a dozen,” another, deeper voice. “Come on guys. Rush the door!”

“No, don’t!” A frightened female called out.

“Shut it, Barbie doll. Let the idiots go get eaten. Maybe we can get away while they become chow,” said a second female voice, that dripped with anger and disdain.

An argument broke out behind the mostly shattered door. “Fucking kids, shut up for a minute and let a man work in peace,” Alvin shouted as he killed another zombie. His voice caused the rest of the horde to turn to him, so Alvin started to back up. A hand clenched onto his leg, making him stumble slightly. The grip was painfully tight. Alvin looked down to see that the torso of a zombie with only one arm, which had a hold of him and was grinding his ankle bones with its grip. “Fuck! On second thought, help!” Alvin called out as he broke the zombie’s skull, before stumbling back, his ankle throbbing in pain.

The remaining eight zombies came after him, groaning as they did. Alvin tried to step forward, but his damaged ankle didn’t want to let him put weight on it. “I’m fucked,” Alvin muttered as he leaned against the wall, to help get pressure off his ankle, as the zombies closed in on him.

The classroom door was shoved out of the way and four very large teens with makeshift weapons came out of the room and started to brain the rear most zombies. Alvin cheered slightly until he felt a grinding on his damaged ankle. Another mostly shredded zombie had crawled under him and raised its head to bite him, tearing at his already damaged ankle through his jeans.

Screaming in agony, Alvin slammed the bat down on the zombie repeatedly before he slumped down the wall, his ankle refusing to support

him. He dragged his tattered jeans up past his swollen and discoloring ankle, thankfully not seeing any puncture marks or actual breaks in his skin. He pulled the ibuprofen from his fanny pack swallowing them dry, hoping they would help dull the pain. The teens killed the last of the zombies as he stuck the bottle of pills back into his pack.

“The broken ones can still fight,” Alvin spat through gritted teeth at them as he pulled his pant leg back down.

“We know, John already lost a finger,” the biggest guy replied. They set about killing the remaining zombies that had been damaged by the explosion earlier. “Who are you?”

“Not important,” Alvin hissed through clenched teeth. “You all need to get out and quick.”

“We can help you,” A lanky teen wearing glasses came forward with a first aid kit, “You helped us, after all.”

“Not important. I was sent to help you. Once you’re off school grounds, I’ll be fine.”

“He’s obviously delirious,” the disdainful voice cut in. Alvin’s eyes paired the voice to a chubby gothic girl who was looking over the nerd’s shoulder. “No one would send a guy who looks this pathetic to save us.”

“I hate to agree with Becky,” the cheerleader behind them added, “but she’s right. We should get out of here.”

Alvin winced as the nerd prodded gently at his ankle. “I said go, kid. Leave me and go.”

The jock nodded, “We’re leaving. You can stay if you want. See ya, dead guy.” The jocks and the cheerleader took off down the hall, while the nerd and goth girl stayed.

“Assholes. They wouldn’t even be alive if not for your bomb, David,” Becky said as she glared at the retreating backs of the other teens.

“We never would have made it to the chem-room without them,” David replied as he began to wrap Alvin’s damaged ankle with a splint.

“Seriously, you two should go,” Alvin told them. He bit back a cry of pain as David wrapped his leg. “This level is done once all kids are dead or gone.”

David eyed him for a second, “Level? You said someone sent you? Do you think this is a game?”

“It is to me. A death game, but a game,” Alvin replied as David helped him to his feet and helped support him. “How did you make a bomb and get it to go through the door, instead of just generally exploding?”

“Shaped charge,” David replied. The trio started down the hall, David partially supporting Alvin. “My dad is sergeant of the bomb squad for the local police force. He’s shown me a lot of stuff over the years.”

“You might survive this, then. The world has gone to hell. Who’s the goth girl who seems to want to stay with you?”

“Becky, she’s my sister. My twin sister, actually. She was the first one to react to the zombies, probably the only reason Chet and his friends were able to help us.”

Becky had picked up his bat as they began to move down the hall, and now carried it over one shoulder. “Who sent you to help us? I mean, come on, a guy in jeans with a bat? How is that helpful? An axe would be way more useful, like a fireman’s axe. Or better yet, a gun.”

“The people in charge of this fucked up game,” Alvin grunted as he hobbled, his one leg not wanting to support any weight.

“Tell me,” David half demanded as they continued to move slowly.

Alvin shrugged and explained what he'd gone through as they limped towards the parking lot. Next to the closest exit was a beat-up station wagon that Becky headed for.

"Sounds like a bad movie," David replied. "Kind of like Transient Decay, but with you as the main character." David seemed to be chewing over the story Alvin had told them.

As Becky got close to the car, a zombie stood up from behind it and lurched towards her. With a cry of fear David shoved Alvin away as he ran to help his sister. She didn't need help as she calmly brained the zombie, though it took her two swings to do it.

"Fucking pansies," Becky snorted. "Not even fast zombies, just the old shufflers."

David let out a deep breath before he looked back at Alvin, only to see Alvin resting against air. His jaw went slack as he stared at Alvin, who seemed to be leaning heavily on empty air. "What the?"

"The wall I can't get out of," Alvin replied to the dumbstruck look. "Now you both get out of here. When you go, I'll either disappear or have to go back into the school to find another kid or two."

Becky walked over to hand Alvin his bat, "Get an axe, or some solid metal object. That bat is about done, I think. And thanks for the assist," her lips twitched at the last comment. She turned back to her car, "Come on bro, time to go."

"But?" David stammered as he went towards the car. "Are we really just going to leave him?"

"Go," Alvin added making a shooing gesture. "Get out of the city, find a small defensible place in a small town. Cities are going to be charnel houses with this shit going on."

Becky nodded as she got in, rolling her window down, "I hope you survive for another day. What happens to us if you die?"

Shrugging, Alvin shook his head as he leaned against thin air. "Got me. Maybe you all get a happy ever after, or the world descends into true hell on earth."

She snorted as she started the car, "I hope you get a gun or something soon, then, because you look like shit."

"Cute. Thanks for the pick me up, Gothy. Keep your brother safe. He has skills to help you."

Becky smirked, accelerating out of the lot. She looked back in the rearview to see a bright light envelop Alvin, and then he was gone. "Huh, so he wasn't lying."

Alvin let the flash take him, then collapsed to the floor of his room as his ankle buckled under him. "Motherfucker," he yelled in pain. He pulled open the store, quickly buying a medkit and applying it to his ankle. A piercing cold enveloped his leg for a second, then the pain was gone.

"Well, at least that works," Alvin said, rolling onto his back. "I'm home, honey."

"Asshole," Scot laughed. "What broke your ankle?"

"Half a zombie grabbed it, then another half tried to eat it through the jeans. A goth chick and her brother saved me. Once they were off school grounds I came back here."

"And you used what XP you had left before the mission to heal up. Wow, you're good…" The sarcasm dripped from Scott's voice.

“Who’s supposed to be the asshole here?” Alvin grunted as he sat up, noticing that the bandage hadn’t come with him. “Guess I should see what that fiasco netted me.”

Mission Summary: Story Mission Successfully Completed.
Total Experience Earned: 1,400 XP
Breakdown: Story Success 450 XP, Shamblers killed 350 XP, Extra Teens Saved 600 XP.

“Huh, made it all back plus some,” Alvin muttered as he got to his feet. “Weird Story Mission, though. Why go through that kind of set up?”

“You are getting closer to unlocking World Mode,” Scott replied. “As soon as you start getting the save as many as you can Missions, it is gearing up for World Mode. Everyone you save in a Story Mission has the chance of being encountered in the World Mode.”

“Ah, well fuck,” Alvin said as he slumped onto his bench. “I was hoping to get a gun before that unlocked.”

“You will have opportunities during World Mode to acquire one. You already have a fanny pack that you can store it in.”

“Once it comes back with me once does that mean it’s mine, and can go back and forth without having to be in the fanny pack at the start?”

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s good at least,” Alvin lay there considering for a few minutes. “Going to have to splurge on a weapon again. The wait for World Mode to open is way too slow.”

“It’s a learning process, and many don’t learn,” Scott replied with a sniff.

Alvin shook his head and rolled over so he was curled up on his bench. “Fuck you too, Scott. I’m taking a nap now.” The light in the room dimmed as he closed his eyes.

Chapter Seven

Alvin woke and stretched, only to have his back spasm severely. Wincing, he slowly began to twist and stretch his back muscles. After a few minutes of careful movement his back seemed better.

The lights kicked back up a moment later, “You’re awake again. What plans do you have for today?”

“I’ll do another Story Mission or twelve. Even with having to buy the medkit, the mission put me ahead over all. Have to buy a new bat first. Going to go with a metal one, probably.”

“I would think another wooden bat would suffice.”

“They degrade really fast,” Alvin sighed. “Then again, I am using them to break skulls open. It’s hard getting enough force into the swing to break the skull and partially mush the brains. Maybe I should go with an axe like Gothy suggested.”

“Gothy?” Scott asked.

“Her name is Becky and her brother is David. Never did get their last name. The two who bandaged my ankle.”

“Ah, two of the ones you rescued.”

Alvin checked through the store and found an axe, but not a fireman’s axe. Frowning, he looked at his bat which was showing considerable signs of wear, which meant it wouldn’t last much longer. He considered what weapon he should buy. Another wooden bat, the metal one, or maybe the axe?

“Fuck it,” Alvin picked up another wooden bat and put it into his fanny pack. He left the ibuprofen behind, in case he needed an empty spot in his pack.

“Don’t die,” Scott said as Alvin’s fingers hovered over the job board.

“Won’t say good luck, huh?”

“Last time I did, the person died,” Scott replied with a trace of sorrow in his voice.

“Must have been Scott, then. You’re going to enjoy being Betty instead.” Alvin quipped as he selected the Story Mission, letting the light envelop him.

When the light cleared, Alvin stood outside a hospital. He pursed his lips in thought for a second, as walking into a hospital with a weapon was normally a bad idea. He couldn’t stash it in his fanny pack since the new bat was in there. He considered his options as he approached the front doors. A man came rushing out, apparently talking to himself in a panicked voice.

“The whole maternity ward, all the kids just stopped breathing all at once. All over the place, people suddenly just fell over dead. The staff is in a panic. I am so out of this.”

Story Mission: Medical Nightmare.
The hospital has an undead issue. Kill as many zombies as you can while people flee.
(Did you bring your insurance card? This is a timed mission, you are locked to the area for four hours.)

Alvin watched the man depart, having overheard the ramble. Figuring that staff was going to be busy anyway, he carried the bat loosely in his left hand as he entered the building. As he approached the doors, they

opened slowly. The normal buzz of electricity heard in the city was missing, he realized, easy to miss with the noises of horns and tires from the street out front.

The emergency lighting was on, which meant there were probably working generators somewhere in the building. Alvin paused to consider which way to go when he heard screams coming from above and below him. A moment later people came pelting from the emergency stairwell, running for the doors. Alvin stepped well out of the way as people went by. Only a handful were staff, most of those fleeing seemed to be patients or visitors.

Once the stream had abated some, he could still hear yells and screams. He considered for a moment, then went to the stairwell and went down. The morgue was likely down after all, and that seemed like the prime spot for most of the initial zombies to come from. He got to the bottom floor to find the door open and a man in lab coat and scrubs laying on the floor, dead eyes staring up at nothing. Alvin pulped the skull, stepping over the body and into the hall beyond. He could make out a person yelling for help from down the hall. Unfortunately, about thirty zombies stood between him and the door the zombies were besieging.

Not thinking it worth the risk, Alvin stepped back out of the hall carefully, and cautiously moved the body out of the doorway. He closed the door softly, then propped the dead guy against it. It wouldn't stop the zombies for long, but a closed door might deter them for a bit. He climbed the stairs, going up to the second floor. The door was open, a quick glance showed him a couple of zombies milling around. One was a nurse, her throat torn out. The other was an elderly man with tubes in his arms.

Alvin stepped into the hall as quietly as he could. He could hear people from down the halls that split to either side of the stairs. The nurse's station was ten feet to his left, he moved toward it. He was only a foot away when the old zombie turned towards him. Alvin brained it with a hard swing. The crack of the skull breaking caught the attention of the second zombie. It let out a loud groan as it lurched at Alvin. As there was a counter between them, it was easy enough for Alvin to kill the second zombie

without it being a big threat. However, the zombie's loud groan apparently alerted the other zombies on the floor.

Zombies started shuffling out of open rooms, while a few muffled screams could be heard from closed rooms. Alvin started towards the closest zombie, hoping to catch them singularly so they would be easier to deal with. He cracked the skull of a middle-aged woman who had a hard-plastic shell on her torso, as if she had just had back surgery. Her throat was torn open raggedly. He followed up with a backhand that broke the skull of a nurse who was missing part of her thigh.

"Why do they seem to go for major arteries?" Alvin muttered as he killed the next zombie, a skinny guy with an IV still in his teenage arm.

He went down the hall, able to kill them one at a time. He bypassed the three rooms with closed doors and voices inside. He turned back the way he had come to find another horde of zombies coming towards him from the other wing of the building.

"Fuck, I could use some help here," Alvin cursed as he took a step forward. He jerked back as the door next to him cracked open, a green eye peering out at him.

"Who are you? Are you with the police?" The woman's voice was surprisingly calm. "Are they dead?"

Alvin glanced back at the oncoming horde, "Not yet. Can you swing a bat?"

The door slammed shut just after he asked the question. "I'll wait in here with my father, while you deal with them."

Alvin sighed as he turned back to the zombies, waiting for them to come to him. As he waited the door next to him shot open, causing Alvin to step back in a momentary panic. A grey-haired, crew cut figure stood in the doorway in a paper gown. The man's most notable feature was his thick handlebar mustache.

“Give me that bat, son. I’ll deal with these ones here,” the man’s gravelly voice carried the tone of a man used to being obeyed.

Alvin gladly handed over his older bat before stepping back a pace and pulling his newer one from his fanny pack. “I’ll cover you. Step back if you need to take a second.”

The older man nodded as he padded forward on bare feet. The blood and bodily fluids squishing under his feet didn’t seem to faze the man. “Dad, no, don’t go,” the woman with green eyes caught Alvin’s attention. A pretty auburn-haired woman stood clutching the now open door. Tears spilled from her eyes and her overly endowed bust was heaving as she pleaded for her father to come back. “Please, dad. You don’t have to fight anymore.”

“Stay in the room, dear. I’ll be done with this trash in a moment. Then we should go to the cabin,” her father replied with eerie calm as he gave the bat a small swing with one hand. “Feels a little like ‘Nam all over again.”

Alvin started after the older guy, looking back over his shoulder at the woman for a second. “I’ll do my best to keep him alive. You need to shut that door and wait for us to finish.”

The woman nodded once as she sniffled and slammed the door shut. Her father looked back at Alvin with a stern gaze, “You better not be thinking improper thoughts about my daughter, otherwise these zombies won’t be your biggest issue.”

Alvin raised a brow at the steel in the old man’s eyes, “How about we deal with the walking dead before we get caught up in other matters?”

“Good plan,” the old man grunted as he swung the bat down hard, pulping a zombie’s head. Instead of the indented skull and small spray of blood that Alvin caused, this was splashy. Blood and brain matter traveled for a few feet from the hit, and the zombie’s head was all but completely

caved in from the strike. “Yup, just like ‘Nam.” With each swing, Alvin was regrettably given a free show of old man’s unclothed backside as the gown opened up.

Alvin blew out a silent whistle at the sheer strength the man had displayed by so easily dispatching the corpses, all while keeping his eyes high so not to see old man butt. Stepping along behind the grey-haired gent, Alvin waited to assist or to switch out. “What’s your name?”

“Call me Bill,” the guy replied while smashing another head with brutal force. “Any idea why these here corpses have gotten up? The Pope was all over the TV a few minutes ago, talking about the End Times.”

“Because this is happening all over the world,” Alvin suggested as he trailed along behind Bill, a little impressed at how nonchalant the old man was about what he was doing.

“Huh. Corpses rising from the dead,” with a snort Bill dispatched another zombie. “So why are you here?”

“I was sent to help as many people get out as I could, while killing as many of these things as I can,” Alvin replied.

Bill glanced back briefly, “Government?”

“Nope. Please, do you think they care about a random hospital?”

A snort of laughter came from Bill, “Good point, son. What’s your name?”

“Call me Al. I was sent for reasons that wouldn’t make one bit of sense to you, sir. I have four hours to complete my objective then I will be gone just as if I never existed.”

“A special mission from a mysterious source, eh?” Bill gave another bark of laughter before pulping another skull. “You gonna say that you vanish in a flash of brilliant light next?”

“Hadn’t planned on it, but that is what actually happens,” Alvin replied with a puzzled expression.

“So, you’re a trouble shooter from points unknown, sent by persons unknown to help those of us fighting the undead hordes?”

“When you put it that way it makes me sound like I’m on a mission from God,” Alvin objected.

“Could be son, could be. Now why don’t you step up for a second and let me rest my arms. Haven’t had to kill this many people for years.”

Alvin wondered at Bill’s references to the Vietnam war. “What was your position during the war?” Alvin asked as he slid forward and killed the next zombie.

“You need to work on your muscles, son. You’re just barely breaking them skulls. I was a tunnel rat. Surprised when I made it out alive.”

“Tunnel rat?” Alvin asked.

“I was the guy in my platoon that would be sent into the tunnels first. Hand gun in each hand and two knives on my waist. Highest mortality position during the war. You have to be a little cracked to do what I did. Follow through, swing through the skull, not to the skull.”

Alvin winced as he felt his back muscles twinge during a swing. “Doing the best I can. I had to carry a large woman a few missions back and wrenched my back something fierce.”

Bill laughed hard, “Just like the current generation, blaming someone else for their woes today. I’ve got more shrapnel in me than you have years of life and you don’t hear me bitching about it.”

Grunting, Alvin killed the next one then slipped in a pool of blood from his previous kills and fell flat to the floor. His back spasmed again, “Fuck.”

Laughing, Bill went by him with a wide grin, “Mind your feet, boy. You’d have been the guy to find the landmine the wrong way.”

Picking himself up, Alvin followed after Bill, impressed by the way he was still casually killing the zombies. “So, you killed lots of people in close combat during the war?”

“Knives, pistols and bare hands were most of my kills,” Bill replied easily. “This seems a touch easy, doesn’t it?”

“Maybe the harder ones haven’t shown up yet,” Alvin muttered.

“Well, I could use me a real challenge. Go find me one, will you?” Bill said as he killed the last zombie in the hall. The bat snapped in half as the zombie’s skull caved in, “Huh, broke your bat. Sorry ‘bout that.”

“No worries. I have another one here,” Alvin replied. “Up to checking the closed doors before we go?”

Bill thought about it then grabbed an IV stand and gave it a test swing, “Sure thing.”

The rooms with closed doors on this floor contained people huddled in fear. Alvin tried to tell them it was safe to flee, but most wouldn’t listen to the blood-stained guy with the bloody bat. It took Bill hauling them to their feet and yelling at them to get them running.

“Fucking pansies,” Bill spat as they went back to his room. “They’re all so much fodder for those things.”

“Probably,” Alvin admitted, but glad he was probably getting stupid XP right now. “You grabbing your daughter and heading out, Bill?”

“Yeah. I’d love to stay and play some more but she is a touch protective, as you saw. You’re welcome to come with. Young man like yourself could be useful, so long as you mind yourself around my daughter.”

Alvin had his mouth open to reply when Bill opened the door to his room. His daughter stood facing the door, holding an IV stand ready to swing. She dropped the makeshift weapon and flung herself into her father’s arms. “Dad, are you okay? Did they bite you? All the movies say if you get bit you turn into one of them.” She stumbled over the words in her haste, looking her father over for wounds while trying to hug him to death.

“Now, now Susan, calm yourself. I’m fine, I didn’t get bit by those slow sad things. Al here was right helpful in keeping me safe. Tell her it’s okay, Al,” Bill said, looking at Alvin over his daughter’s head with commanding eyes.

“Susan, Bill is fine. I probably wouldn’t have made it without his help. He’s a hero.”

Bill snorted at that, “I ain’t no hero. Anyway, got to get my clothes on so we can go. Thanks for the rodeo, Al, and good luck with your mission.”

Susan reluctantly let go of her dad as he started to get dressed. She turned to Alvin studying him for a moment, then extended her hand to him. “Thank you for keeping him safe, Al. My father means the world to me. He’s the only family I’ve ever had.”

Alvin took her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze before releasing it and meeting her eyes. “It was an honor to serve even briefly next to your father, miss.”

He did take the chance to give her a quick once over. A pretty auburn haired, green eyed, farm girl. Tight jeans along with cowboy boots, accenting the flannel shirt that did nothing to hide her impressive chest.

Susan frowned slightly, “You’re staying?”

“Have to,” Alvin checked the interface timer, “for another two hours and fifty minutes.”

“He’s on a mission, dear, leave him be. All men have to do what they have been ordered to do.” Bill added as he stepped up next to his daughter, fully dressed. His button-down flannel and jeans, along with the boots and hat screamed country, just like his daughter. “Hope you make it out alive, son. If worst comes to worst, finish the mission, even if it means you can’t save them all.”

Alvin nodded as he traded a handshake with Bill, wincing as the large paw crushed his hand easily. “Will do, sir. I hope you and Susan make it out of the city safely, and make it to your cabin.”

“Once I get to the truck things will be fine,” Bill grinned. “Had to leave my guns in the car, damn liberal pussies have a no gun policy in hospitals.”

“Guns?” Alvin asked, suddenly focused. “Could I perhaps get a loaner?”

Bill laughed as he clapped Alvin on the back hard enough to make him slide a few inches. “If you can help get Susan to the car uninjured I’ll give you one. Now let’s go, shall we?”

“One sec, please,” Alvin said, stepping into the attached bathroom to take a leak. As he washed his hands he wished he had brought the ibuprofen. “After you then, sir. Susan, if you’ll follow him, I’ll be tail end Charlie.”

Bill grunted, “Dangerous position to be. Okay, we’re going.”

The trio went to the stairs. There were muffled thumps and screams coming from higher up. Bill didn’t hesitate, but started down to the ground floor. Susan paused, but Alvin gave her a small tap. She glanced back with

a frown but hurried after her father. Alvin met her frown with a blank expression, then followed after her. The hallway on the ground floor was empty, but groans could be heard from the dining area. None of them waited, rushing out the door and into the parking lot. A handful of zombies were wandering around, so Alvin took a few fast steps to catch up to Bill.

“I’ll take care of them, if you give me rough directions to your car,” Alvin said as he stepped up past Bill.

“The old camo painted truck off to the back left of the lot is mine. The one with the tool chest mounted in the back,” Bill clarified as if the only camo painted truck could be mistaken for something else.

Alvin spotted it and headed that way, taking the few paces out of the way to kill the few zombies between them and the late 60’s GMC truck with the toolbox welded to the back. It didn’t take them long reach the truck. Bill unlocked the passenger door, opening it for Susan who hopped in. Alvin idly wished he could have gone with them as Susan’s denim clad ass was pretty nice. He tore his eyes away as the door closed and Bill went to the tool chest, unlocking a panel.

Alvin let out an impressed whistle as he saw the number of firearms in the chest. “Good gods, were you expecting an apocalypse?”

“Always be prepared,” Bill replied calmly as he pulled out a 1911 with a fully loaded clip. He handed it to Alvin with the belt holster, then pulled out three more loaded clips. “Here you go, son. Best of luck and may God look down on you with favor.” He pulled out a few more guns, handing them to his daughter through the truck window. She laid each of them out on the seat and started checking them.

Alvin placed the gun and the holster briefly into his fanny pack before withdrawing it and clipping it to his belt. He placed each of the clips into the pack, then into his pockets. “Thank you, Bill. This will make things so much easier. I wish you the best of luck as well.”

Bill grunted, “Luck you make for yourself, son. Only God knows when he will call you home.” Bill went around the large truck, his daughter unlocking the door for him. A moment later the diesel engine was rumbling than the truck was in motion.

Alvin caught Susan looking back at him with a puzzled expression, so he gave her a goodbye wave before heading back into the building. Maybe he could save a nurse or doctor before the time limit ran out. Either of those would be useful come World Mode. Alvin pulled the gun, taking a moment to familiarize himself with it. “Okay. Let’s see if a gun makes a big difference.”

Once he was back inside Alvin checked the clock. He still had almost two and a half hours left. He paused in the main entry area. He could still hear the groans of zombies from the cafeteria, but he went for the stairs instead. He could hear muffled bumps as if a zombie was walking into the door without knowing it was a door. Ignoring it for now, Alvin climbed to the third floor and quietly opened the door, listening carefully. The only sounds were those made by zombies as they shuffled aimlessly around. He closed the door gently and went up to the fourth floor.

He could hear the groans of zombies but they sounded muffled. He could also hear voices, but couldn’t make out what they were saying. Pushing the door open slowly, Alvin stepped quietly onto the floor and tried to figure out which way he should go. The groans were coming from his left, so he went right. The voices got a bit louder, but he still couldn’t make out the words. He walked down the hall, passing a few bodies that had their skulls broken open.

The furthest door was closed and the voices were behind it. Alvin gently tapped a ‘shave and a haircut’ on the door, which instantly stopped the voices. A few seconds later a double tap came from inside, “Living?” Came the question from behind the door.

“Living, the way is clear to the lobby and out the main doors. Just move quietly. Third floor is fucked as is the basement, but second floor is clear.”

The door cracked open, revealing a bald white guy holding a metal strut that was bent and bloody. The orderly eyed him for a second then frowned deeply at the gun, “This is a no gun building.”

Alvin sighed and gave the orderly a look that all but asked if the man was stupid. “You’re seriously going to chastise me about a handgun, while zombies eat your patients? Is there anyone with brains in this room, or is it just you?”

“You motherfucker,” the orderly hissed, opening the door wider and raising his weapon.

Alvin cocked the hammer as he pointed the gun right at the man’s face, “If your shoulder twitches I will pull the trigger. Want to see if your arm or my finger is quicker?”

“Enough,” hissed a voice from behind the orderly. “If the way is clear we should go now. If you will back away from the door, we just want out.”

Alvin’s eyes didn’t waver from the orderly, “Have the ape back up and hand the strut off to one of you, then you can all run.”

Alvin watched a man with Persian ancestry move up, taking the strut before pulling the orderly back from the door. Alvin backed away, lowering his weapon but didn’t uncock the gun, “The way is clear. Good luck, because the world is fucked.”

The man who had taken the strut had a doctor’s badge on his coat, “I figured. Are you staying?”

“For another hour plus. Need to see if anyone else is alive,” Alvin replied, backing up to set his back to the wall at the end of the hall. “There might be more people holed up like you.”

“We locked all the rooms on this floor, we didn’t hear anyone asking for help. Goodbye,” the doctor walked out of the room, followed by the glaring orderly and three nurses.

Alvin watched the nurses go, all three looked at him with varying degrees of disgust, probably for backing the orderly down. Lips twisted in slight distaste, Alvin waited for them to go before he followed them down the hall. He opted to avoid the rest of the floor and went up to the top floor instead. As he opened the door to the fifth floor, he found carpet instead of the normal hard floor.

Off to his right, near the elevator was a single door marked Human Resources. He went left, where a number of doors opened into the hallway. The offices each consisted of a smaller front room and much larger office. They were all open and deserted, though he could now hear voices from further down the hall. A feminine scream, cut off abruptly, sounded from the far door. Alvin might have missed it if he hadn’t been as close as he was, so he skipped to the door at the end of the hall. Hospital Director, Marcus Fatale, the sign on the door proclaimed. The front office was a mess, as if there had been a fight. The inner office door was ajar and he could hear a single voice beyond it.

“You fucking bitch, I’ll kill you myself! You think that I care what happens to me now?! I’ll fuck you, kill you, then give your body over the things downstairs,” the man raved. A mad giggle bubbled from the man’s lips. “Then I’ll join you in hell.”

Alvin shoved the door open, to see a man in a suit, his pants around his ankles, leaning over a woman on the desk. His hands clamped around her throat as she feebly struggled against his arms. The strangler looked up as Alvin took two quick steps into the room. As the man opened his mouth to speak, Alvin closed the distance with the gun up. He fired two rounds through the man’s head in rapid succession. Blood and brains blossomed out the back of the man’s skull, spraying the window behind him.

Alvin swallowed as he felt his gorge rise. He hadn’t killed a living person during this madness, until now. His hands shook slightly as he took

in the gruesome tableau before him. The dead body had collapsed onto the woman, blood and brain from the head wounds dripping down onto her. He set the safety on his pistol and holstered it, then went to move the corpse. He shoved the dead body off the woman as she stirred weakly, her eyes fluttering open.

Alvin stepped back quickly, pulling the gun just in case she tried to attack him. He watched the woman blink as her hands came up to her neck. Her faced blanched in horror as her hands encountered the bloody gore plastered across her front.

“You okay?” Alvin asked, his voice dead calm, concealing his minor distress that he had just killed a man. Her eyes shifted to him with gun in hand standing back from the desk and she started to hyperventilate. Alvin stepped back from her again, “Look, your boss was killing you when I got here. He’s dead. Are you okay?”

Her voice was shaky and hoarse, “You killed him?”

“Well, he was strangling you and talking about rape, so it seemed like the thing to do,” Alvin replied as he looked away from her and the body by her feet. “Just don’t look down, his body doesn’t look pretty.”

The secretary slid off the desk to the side, bracing herself against it as she kept her eyes on him. “Are you going to kill me next?” she tugged her skirt down as she asked the question.

“Wasn’t planning on it. I’m trying to save as many people as I can. The rest of the floor seems empty, so you should be able to make it to the stairs and down. Just be careful, the third floor and basement are overrun with zombies. What were you still doing up here?”

She briefly glanced at her boss’s dead body before turning away, obviously sickened at the sight. “Trying to get my stuff to flee. Marcus wouldn’t let me go. We argued before he dragged me in here and demanded that I stay with him. I fought him, but he overpowered me and...” She

lightly touched her bruised neck, which was still covered in blood. She took a breath before she continued, “Thank you. Are you going to let me leave?”

“You are free to go,” Alvin told her as he stepped clear of the door and holstered the firearm. “Just be careful. If you give me a few minutes I’ll go with you to make sure you make it. I just want to rummage through the offices for anything useful.”

“What do you want?” she asked as he walked over to the body. She moved away as he approached, obviously still wary.

“Anything useful,” Alvin replied. “Pretty sure paper money is going to be a bust from here on. So, any hard currency, like this gold ring. Might still be worth something.” Alvin told her as he yanked the wedding band off Marcus’s finger. He also took the man’s silver money clip and a gold Rolex watch. “These might be worth barter once people start to group up.” The secretary edged towards another door while he looted the corpse, her face showing how appalled she was at his actions. Alvin let her go, but kept an eye on her, “Out of curiosity do you have a name? Or should I call you Secretary?”

She paused, “Why?”

“Just like to know who I saved from being raped and strangled to death,” Alvin replied calmly as he stood, items in hand.

“Claudia Jenkins,” she replied. She opened the door she had moved to, and Alvin caught a glimpse of a bathroom. “Excuse me for a moment, please.” Claudia ducked into the bathroom and closed the door behind her.

Alvin checked the rest of the room, adding a gold pen to his loot. He placed each item into his fanny pack, then stowed the items among his pockets. He was examining the small bar built into a wall when Claudia came out of the bathroom. “All done?”

“No,” she replied simply, moving to the bar and picking up a bottle. She took it and headed straight back to the bathroom, grabbing a small

clutch purse as well. The door shut firmly behind her.

Alvin sniffed a couple of decanters before he found the whiskey. He poured himself a shot and knocked it back. He was on his second shot when the door opened and Claudia came out looking much cleaner. Her clothes were still bloodstained and damp, but the effort showed. The damp clothing accented the fact she had a pretty decent body. Her blouse had gone translucent, and the lacy black bra cupping her c-cup breasts was easy to make out.

“All done now?” he asked, not even trying to hide the fact that he was checking her out. He thought her tasteful skirt suit was quite fetching. He already knew she was a natural blonde as she hadn’t had panties on when he had rescued her.

Claudia’s eyes narrowed as she caught him looking her over, “Yes.”

Alvin downed the shot and dropped the glass onto the carpet, “Well then, let’s go. I’ll take point, but I want to check the other offices to see if there’s anything else worth my time.”

“The only office that would have anything is finance,” Claudia told him. “Marvin used to keep a few rare coins on display.”

“Finance it is, then,” Alvin replied, starting down the hall to finance. He heard a few groans coming from human resources, “Seems the natives are becoming restless. Must have been the gunshots.”

Claudia looked very uneasy but stuck with him when he went into the finance office. Alvin spotted the locked coin displays on the wall, shrugging he holstered the gun and pulled out his bat from his fanny pack. He broke the glass on the display, returning his bat to the fanny pack before carefully gathering the coins from the now open case. Each coin was placed in his fanny pack, then moved to a pocket. He turned back to find Claudia blinking at him with wide eyes.

“You okay?”

“How does a bat fit into that?” She pointed at his bag, clearly shocked.

“Magic bag. It lets me store any one item that can fit into the top of the bag.”

Claudia frowned, “Don’t fucking lie to me.”

Alvin snorted, “I told you the truth. It isn’t my fault you don’t like the answer. There are zombies eating people, but you balk over a magic bag?”

Taking a step back, Claudia looked away from him, “This day is insane. Maybe I’m losing my mind.”

“The whole world is, Dia,” he paused as he heard a door break close by. “Fuck. Looks like HR wants to stage a revolt. Stay behind me.” He drew the gun and went to the door to look into the open space towards HR.

Five zombies shambled into view. Four of them sported fatal wounds, but the fifth one looked unharmed beyond a few scratches on its face as it shuffled out of the office behind the others. Alvin stepped into the hall and took careful aim, and missed. Cussing, he took aim again as the five zombies turned to him. His next shot hit the nearest zombie square in the head, blowing brains and thick blood all over the remaining four.

Alvin felt the gore factor slide off of him, he seemed to have become completely inured to zombie deaths. He killed the next two with his next three shots then ejected the magazine, sticking it into his empty back pocket. He grabbed a fresh one from the other back pocket. Once he had seated the magazine he made sure the gun chambered a round, then fired twice more to kill the last two zombies that had closed to within a dozen feet of him.

“All clear,” he called out, frowning as his voice sounded off.

Claudia came out holding her hands over her ears, “We can go now?”

Claudia’s voice sounded muffled and Alvin realized he must have damaged his hearing during the brief gun play. “Follow me,” he told her, stepping around the zombies as he led her to the stairs. He got her to the ground floor and had to kill another three zombies that were milling around the lobby before he got her outside. “Which way is your car?”

Claudia pointed in the opposite direction from the way Bill’s truck had been. He took the lead while she directed him. They ended up in a cluster of high end cars. Claudia tried to use her fob to unlock the doors. It didn’t work, so she keyed open the door instead and slipped into the vehicle. When she turned the key, the engine didn’t turn over. “What is going on?” Claudia asked as she tried a few more times with no success.

“Odd. A patient had no issue getting his truck running,” Alvin muttered.

“Why won’t my car work?” Claudia asked, climbing out of the car.

“No idea. Try calling triple A and see if they know anything,” Alvin half-joked.

Claudia fumed as she pulled her cell phone from her purse. She looked at it oddly for a moment, prodding at several buttons, “It’s dead. It was fully charged this morning. Fucking Nokea, they said it would always work.” Her hand curled around it tightly, as if she wanted to throw it.

“Okay, so cell phones don’t work and your new car doesn’t work, but an older truck does,” Alvin muttered as he tried to figure it out. “Maybe it has to do with the electronics?”

“That doesn’t help me any,” Claudia complained. “I don’t think walking in the city is going to be safe.”

“I would think not,” Alvin muttered. “Let’s go see if there are older cars are around. Maybe we can get one of them to run.”

“How can we do that without keys?” Claudia groused.

“I can hotwire a car,” Alvin said as he started back towards the patient lot.

“You’re a criminal?” Claudia asked, hurrying to stay with him. Her heels clacked on the pavement.

“Used to be,” Alvin told her. “I did my time, then got a job working for a security firm. I tested out physical security systems for our clients to make sure they worked.”

She didn’t say anything while he canvassed the parking lot, eventually finding a VW Bug. Chuckling, he broke the passenger side window open and unlocked the door. He leaned across to unlock the driver door then went around the car. He popped the hood to see what was in the storage space. There was a small tool box, he opened it with a smile and pulled out a large flathead screwdriver. Going back to the driver’s side he slid in, rolling the window down, before he slammed the screwdriver into the ignition.

He cranked the screwdriver over and the engine came to life. Laughing, he got out of the car. He waved Claudia into the driver’s seat as he closed the hood. “All yours, Dia,” Alvin told her as he shut the door behind her. He leaned on the window, “Your best bet is to leave the city. Get out into the country, find some people and team up with them. Find a small place you can defend and hold the fort. Maybe civilization will start up again.”

“You’re not coming with?” Claudia asked, puzzled.

“Can’t, it’s not my time yet,” Alvin told her. He crouched down so he was at eye level with her. “I have a little under an hour left here, then I’ll

be moving on to help others. Maybe we'll see each other again, maybe we won't. Just do your best to survive."

"Why aren't you coming with me?" Claudia asked a little more intensely, not understanding. "I'll… I'm sure we can work something out." Her eye twitched as she said the words, as if she had to force them out.

Shaking his head, Alvin grinned, "I wouldn't turn you down either, Dia. However, I won't even be on this Earth when my time comes up. I can't explain it. Just trust me when I say this, if I could come with you, I would and gladly. Find a guy who can protect you. I'm sure a lot of guys will jump at the chance to be that guy. Now get going, just drive carefully. If you wreck this thing you probably won't be getting another one."

"But…" Claudia began as Alvin stood up and backed away from the car. She frowned, before coming to a decision and drove away.

Alvin watched her go, silently cursing the fact that she was gone. He would have been more than happy to go with her. She had a very nice body from what he had seen of her, and she hadn't completely lost her shit after seeing her boss's corpse or the zombies. "Fucking Scott and his company," Alvin muttered as he went around the parking lot. He killed the last bit of his time at the hospital just wandering the lot and killing the odd zombie that crossed his path. When the timer was up he had expended half of his ammo, leaving him with fourteen rounds in the two full magazines and two empty magazines.

The light flared and he was back in his room. He turned out his pockets, laughing when he had everything that he'd looted on him. "Well that works. Might be a bug though?"

Chapter Eight

“No, it is considered an acceptable use of game mechanics,” Scott replied. “You should just about have enough experience to be able to buy the next storage item. That might make things interesting.”

“Let’s see what the mission netted us first,” Alvin replied, pulling up the summary.

Mission Summary: Story Mission Successfully Completed.
Total Experience Earned: 2,000 XP
Breakdown: Mission XP 500, Take no damage bonus 100 XP, Shamblers killed 500 XP, Survivors bonus 800 XP, Humans killed -100 XP, Loot bonus 200 XP.

Alvin pulled up his total XP with a smile. 3,150 XP. “Now this I can work with.” Alvin chuckled as he took a quick look over what he could afford. He saw ammo for the gun, starting at 5 XP per round. “Kind of pricey for ammo.”

“But it makes killing zombies easier, lets you stay out of their reach and is much less effort to employ,” Scott remarked.

“True enough,” Alvin muttered, sitting down on his bed. “You get to watch me while I do the Missions?”

“Of course, how else would I know what you get up to? Are you going to spend your XP?”

“Not yet. Going to look over all my options first.”

“You should study your gun carefully,” Scott said.

Alvin pulled the gun and looked at it. A pop-up appeared next to the gun.

S&W 1911 (Common)
Damage: 8
Durability: 216/250
Ammo type: .45 ACP
Upgradable: 0/2

His jaw sagging open Alvin, just stared at the gun for a few minutes before he set it down and pulled out the bat.

Worn Wooden Bat (Trash)
Damage: 1+3 (modified by Brawn 3)
Durabilit:y 28/50
Non-Upgradable

“What the fuck, Scott?” Alvin finally managed to say. “Why the fuck didn’t you tell me about weapons being upgradable?”

“You didn’t have one that could be,” Scott replied. “We are not allowed to tell the players about weapons upgrades until they have a weapon that can be upgraded.”

“Is there armor as well?”

Scott remained silent for a long beat before replying. His voice was mechanical when he spoke. “That information is not available at this time.”

“Motherfuckers,” Alvin bitched. “Not being told about that kind of thing might be why more people fail.”

“I actually agree with you. Players should get some information sooner.”

“Hmm, let’s see about upgrades for the gun then,” Alvin pulled open the store menu again. A new tab was blinking at him, the gear upgrade tab.

His gun and fanny pack were both listed. “Scott, the bag is also upgradable.”

“When did they do that?” Scott grumbled. “I’ll be a minute.”

Alvin studied his choices. The bag could be upgraded to hold four items for 1,000 XP, or he could change the look of it which had varying costs depending on what he wanted to change it to. The gun had several options beyond being able to customize the look of it in a number of minor ways. Alvin focused on the options for the gun.

Unlimited Ammo (rank 1): Every magazine put into this gun will be a full clip, even if it was previously empty (nice cheat code huh?). Cost: 500 XP.

Unlimited Ammo (rank 2): Requires rank 1. This gun will never have to be reloaded (just keep firing asshole). Cost: 5,000 XP.

Durability (rank 1): Increase durability by a multiple of five (much harder to break, isn’t it?). Cost: 250 XP.

Durability (rank 2): Requires rank 1. Increase durability by a multiple of twenty (you must really like this gun). Cost: 5,000 XP.

Durability (rank 3): Requires rank 2. Increase durability by a multiple of one hundred (abuse it like a five-dollar hooker and it just keeps on working). Cost: 30,000 XP.

Ammunition (rank 1a): Gun fires hollow point rounds as standard, increasing damage by 50% if armor value is under 10 (more bang for your buck). Cost: 1,000 XP.

Ammunition (rank 1b): Gun fires jacketed rounds as standard, reducing target armor by half (still more bang for your buck). Cost: 1,000 XP.

Ammunition (rank 2a): Requires rank 1a or rank 1b. Gun fires silver ammunition as standard (silver? Really?). Cost: 10,000 XP.

Ammunition (rank 2b): Requires rank 1a or rank 1b. Gun fires ammunition blessed by a higher power as standard (seriously? Holy bullets? Why?). Cost: 15,000 XP.

Recoil (rank 1): Reduces the kick of the weapon by half (that will help keep your wrists in shape for other activities). Cost: 500 XP.

Recoil (rank2): Recoil reduced further, allowing you to regain the target faster (just want to keep shooting do you?). Cost: 3,000 XP.

"Well fuck. This is going to be tough," Alvin muttered as he looked over his choices. "Well, one is obvious." He spent 500 XP for the first rank of Unlimited Ammo. "Scott, you there?"

"Can I help?" Scott's voice seemed a bit odd.

"How does durability work for guns?"

"Each clip that expends at least one bullet reduces the durability by one. It only takes one point, even if you fire the entire clip." Scott's voice was oddly distant, as though he were distracted.

"You okay there, Scott?"

"Just looking over the patch notes that not all of us got," Scott's voice was now tinged with disdain. "This would have been useful to know beforehand. Nothing I can really share with you right now, though."

"So, still not helpful then," Alvin muttered as he considered his last two choices for upgrades. "How much health does a zombie even have?"

"Two health to each part of the body to damage, four to destroy. Four to the head will destroy the brain. You have just been able to meet that

requirement.”

“It’s not like I need to upgrade the damage of the gun then,” Alvin mused. He picked up the first rank of Durability, which would make the gun last so much longer. He checked the stats again now that he had spent 750 XP on it.

S&W 1911 (Common)
Damage: 8
Durability: 1,216/1,250
Ammo type: .45 ACP
Upgradable: 2/2

He pulled the magazine from the gun and slapped the empty mag into it. As the empty magazine clicked into place he felt the weight of the gun shift. Ejecting the magazine, he saw it was full. With a chuckle, he filled the other magazine and left it in the gun. “Okay, then. Still got a little over two grand. What to spend it on?”

“Look over the store carefully. You have options in most categories,” Scott told him.

“Thinking of upgrading my fanny pack first,” Alvin replied.

“That is your choice. But the store could prove to be very useful,” Scott replied. His voice carried a subtle vibe.

Alvin wavered for all of a second before he opened up the store and started looking through each section in detail. He found different ammo types for his gun sold by the bullet. The cost started at 5 XP for a normal round, going up to 200 XP for a single silver hollow point. The description indicated it was powdered silver encased in a polymer stuck into the hollow. Alvin wondered why silver bullets kept coming up, but set the thought aside and kept going through the store. When he got to storage items, his fanny pack was there plus a new listing for a backpack costing 3,000 XP that had a base of six slots.

“That could change things up,” Alvin muttered, imagining how it could help him. “All the extra carry space, would make looting easier.”

“You can use the fanny pack and the backpack at the same time. But you can’t equip any two of the same bag,” Scott provided.

“Sucks, but it makes sense from your point of view. Three grand seems a little steep right now, though,” Alvin replied.

“You are close to World Mode, which makes it very likely you will find things that you want to hold onto. You’ve already found the first way to make sure you can bring things back. Now think about carting things back here, then being able to store them to grab for later use while in the World.”

“Yeah,” Alvin agreed, weighing that option against upgrading his fanny pack and maybe getting a medkit. It was unlikely that he’d need to carry the bat now that he had a gun. He kept looking through the store as he turned the ideas over. There was a lot more available than there had been the first time he looked.

He paused again when he came to the medical section. “Seriously? A grand for the medkit, two grand gets you a regrowth kit that replaces a lost limb, and five grand gets you a health potion that will fully restore your entire body, replacing limbs as well?”

“Yes. It was decided to offer a cheaper option for those who experience limited damage.” Scott replied.

“Hmm, I need to think about this,” Alvin said as he sat on his bunk, mentally reviewing all the options he had seen so far.

As he sat there his mind came back around to his question about armor. He opened the store and found the search box, using it to search for armor he could afford. The results included denim and leather clothing, boots, and even some sports equipment. Frowning, he tapped on denim jeans to see what it would tell him.

Denim Jeans (common)
Armor: 2
Durability: 25/25
Upgradeable: 0/2

He tapped the denim jacket to check it next.

Denim Jacket (common)
Armor: 2
Durability: 25/25
Upgradable: 0/2

He then checked the leather jacket to see how it compared to the Denim.

Leather Jacket (common)
Armor: 5
Durability: 50/50
Upgradable: 0/2

He checked the boots as well just to see.

Hiking Boots (common)
Armor: 2
Durability: 25/25
Upgradable: 0/2

Combat Boots (common)
Armor: 5
Durability: 50/50
Upgradable: 0/2

“Okay, so armor does exist, but what does it do?”

“It adds to the amount of damage you can take to that area of your body,” Scott answered quickly, as if he had been waiting for the question.

“Wait, explain it better.”

“Look at your character screen again,” Scott told him, snickering just a little.

When Alvin focused on the image of himself, it zoomed in and had more information. Each portion of his body included a number in a small box. Currently, almost everything but his legs were at 3. The listing for his legs showed 3 (5). “So, the jeans are giving me two armor, to my legs?”

“That is correct,” Scott replied with a burr of humor.

“But they can’t be upgraded because they’re trash, unlike the common ones I can buy?”

“Yup,” Scott chuckled.

“Why is my back at a two?”

“You hurt it carrying someone not that long ago. It will heal on its own, it’s just slow. Heals about one point every three days or so.”

“Huh. What about head gear?”

Without waiting for Scott’s answer, he searched for head gear. He found everything from hats with no armor and helmets with armor. Those ranged from simple bicycle helmets that only added one extra Armor up to army issue combat helmets that added ten to Armor. “Okay, now we get to something that seems way more game like. Still stupidly expensive, but game like. I’m betting I can find some of this stuff out in the World, too.”

Scott was strangely silent on the matter, so Alvin continued his ramble. “As it costs so much to upgrade the items or to flat buy them I’m going to pass on armor and weapons for the time being, I think.”

“You might regret that. A smart player would spend all they could,” Scott told him. Alvin opened the store, upgrading his fanny pack and

buying a bowl of sustenance. “You’re going back out again? Already?” Scott asked, sounding nervous as Alvin shoveled the tasteless sludge into his mouth.

“Sure am. I’ll be getting for the backpack next,” Alvin replied. He used the bathroom, then opened the job board. “Okay. Let’s see what the game wants to throw me next.”

Chapter Nine

When the light cleared, Alvin found himself in the back of a store. Shelves of boxes and products were smashed open all around him. Most of the boxes carried the name and logo for Val-Mart. Face palming slightly, Alvin shook his head, “Really, guys?”

Story Mission: The Zombies of Val-Mart.
The store is under siege from the undead. Get the People of Val-Mart to safety.
(All zombies love to shop at Val-Mart. At least 1 person must make it to a functional vehicle.)

Picking his way through the debris, Alvin noted that the dock doors were wedged tightly shut, along with the two walk-in doors. Boxes and pallets were piled into impressive barricades at each point.

Carefully moving through the debris that was filled with broken bits of glass, he made it to the doors leading into the store proper. He glanced through the small window in one door before he gently nudged it open. The smell of rot washed over him, making him wrinkle his nose. A look to the right revealed defunct coolers full of rotting meat, as he was right next to the grocery area of the store.

He looked down the first few aisles. The entire right side of the store was devoted to groceries. To his left, the baby section gave way to clothes and other household goods. He could hear voices from further in the store, seemingly in argument. He wondered how to introduce himself, as he obviously hadn’t been here when the people had barricaded the store.

The parts of the store he could see had been pretty thoroughly trashed. He went towards home goods, where the voices seem to be coming

from and away from the stench which was making him slightly nauseous.

Rounding an endcap, he found a group of ten people all standing around an eleventh person laying on the ground. Keeping his hands in plain sight as two of the people were armed with pump shotguns. He coughed gently, “Excuse me, folks.”

Both guns came up, while others with bats turned while raising them. A guy in biker leathers spoke up as the tableau held, “Who are you and how did you get in?”

“Call me Al. I came in from the back of the store. That isn’t the real point, though. What’s wrong with that guy?” Alvin motioned to the guy on the ground with his chin.

“He was bitten, so we’re waiting to see if he turns.” A painfully skinny blonde, who screamed meth addict to Alvin, replied to him, her voice reedy and thin.

“A bite doesn’t do it,” Alvin replied. “Dying does. Doesn’t matter the cause, once you die, you rise.”

“How do you know that?” A black teen with saggy jeans and backwards cap asked. “You know what this is all about, nigga?”

“No, but how many have you killed in the store and how many of them had been obvious bite victims? Better yet, how many had no marks of trauma at all?”

“Hold up,” the biker barked. “You saying the barricade in the back of the store is breached?” That caused a worried murmur to start up, “Shut it, the lot of you.” The crowd clammed up instantly, telling Alvin who was in charge here.

“No, it’s still intact, for now. I can try to explain, but it won’t make any more sense than dead people standing back up. Let’s give him some

first aid, if he was bit by a dead body he might still get an infection and die. If he dies he comes back, so let's try to stop that from happening."

"Please," a girl about eight years of age cried, "I just want daddy to be okay."

The biker glared at Alvin, then glanced at the little girl before motioning to a Hispanic guy. "Ramone, bandage him up. Try to kill any infection first. The rest of you go back to your stations. You mister, you come with me," the biker said, his eyes focusing on Alvin.

Alvin watched as most of the people split into groups of two as they wandered off while Ramone knelt down to begin doctoring the bitten man. He followed after the biker as the man brushed past him.

They stopped next to the sporting goods section, which was the most ransacked section Alvin had seen. The biker leaned back against what used to be the knife display counter. "Tell me what you meant about not understanding."

Alvin raised a brow, "Okay. But if you think I'm crazy, it isn't my fault." Alvin began to relay his story, being interrupted by questions from time to time. Alvin didn't include the part about upgrading his gun, though.

"If your story is true, you have a bat in that fanny pack. Pull it out," the biker finally said when Alvin stopped.

Alvin pulled the worn bat from his pack, earning a soft whistle from the biker. Alvin put it away while biker seemed to be lost in thought for the moment. "This is all a game to some sick fucks. All of our misery and suffering here is for them to get their rocks off. That kind of pisses me off."

"I don't blame you. I also have no idea what happens to you all if I die. This whole world might cease to exist or it might continue until the zombies win."

“Fuck a duck,” the biker sighed. “I’m Randy. I had to organize this collection of people. There are easily a few hundred zombies milling around outside the building. If what you say is right, we just need to get to a car that will run and leave for you to win. However, I would like more. I want to get them all out with the canned food we have.”

“I don’t fault your wants. Is there roof access from inside?”

Randy gave him a false smile, “Yes there is. You going to go shoot them? You’ll run out of ammo and they’ll just keep coming.”

“I didn’t tell you everything, Randy. Why don’t you come up on the roof with me? You can see about spotting some older vehicles we can use to get you all gone. In the meantime, you can have them get the supplies ready to move.”

Randy grunted, eyeing him, “You are not going to listen to me, are you?”

“Not likely, unless it gets me out of here faster,” Alvin replied. “You want out, and I want you to get out. It will be a winning situation for all of us. Tell me where the roof access is and I’ll head up there.”

Alvin followed the directions he was given. He paused as he came around the corner to find the meth addict blowing the teen in the back of the customer service area. “That gives a new twist to service with a smile in this store,” Alvin commented as he moved on past them.

The kid’s eyes snapped open in surprise. “What are you doing…” The meth addict didn’t stop what she was doing though, making his statement fizzle as he wasn’t long from the finish line.

“Going to the roof for a party. Not as fun as yours but infinitely safer. Make sure to give her whatever she agreed to as payment or she might cut you,” Alvin commented as he grabbed the ladder and started climbing to the roof.

The kid watched him with a shocked expression, trying to get his brain to work without blood. Alvin glanced down to see the small baggie of small crystals that fell from the kid's hand as he tipped over the edge of his orgasm. Nodding, Alvin now knew why the addict had agreed to blow the teen.

Once on the roof, Alvin sighed, "Well, one of them is a waste and the other is just an addict. Oh well, more XP for me if I save them all." He walked to the edge of the roof and looked down into the massive parking lot.

He could make out buildings stretching well off to the left. The store anchored one side of a shopping center, the parking lot for the entire place held a few hundred vehicles. It also contained more than a few hundred zombies, including some zombie children. He spotted a few dead animals lying amongst the cars.

"Animals aren't reviving," Alvin muttered as he took in the scene. He pulled his gun and chambered a round while he waited for Randy. He could see a number of older vehicles, but the one that really caught his eye was an old bus. It was painted up in garish tie dye colors, and looked like it dated from the seventies. "That looks like a good candidate."

"The bus?" Randy's voice came from behind Alvin.

"Yeah. It should hold you all easily and can probably hold the stuff you want to take. I'd also suggest that jeep over there. It looks like it has a winch on the bumper, which might be useful if the bus gets into trouble."

"They're separated by a lot of ground and zombies," Randy commented. He eyed the pistol, "You don't think you can clear enough of them with that, do you?"

Alvin turned slightly with a broad grin, "Let's go over that way a bit. There are no doors under the point of fire then. Maybe that will help delay them."

Alvin moved to the spot he'd picked, taking up a position with his body braced against the ledge. He held the position for a few seconds, then pulled back. Randy followed him over. "Hmm, this is going to take a bit. Think you can get the drug dealer to bring a few pillows up?"

Frowning, Randy cocked his head to one side, "Drug dealer?"

"The teen was getting a blowjob from the addict for a small baggie of meth when I came up."

"Really," Randy growled, his eyes darkening, "I'll be right back."

Alvin watched the upset biker go back into the building, then turned his attention back to the parking lot with a shrug. He was sure after a few minutes that the zombies were just mindlessly wandering at the moment. The first few shots would change that, though. He wished for a second that he had a rifle.

Glancing at his pistol, he frowned. His accuracy would suck until the zombies got close to the building. He wiped at his forehead, wondering what was taking Randy so long when he heard someone coming up the ladder.

The teen from before, sporting a swollen lip and a sour expression came up the ladder carrying a pillow. Alvin waited as the teen came closer. As the distance closed the teen met his eyes with hatred. "Here's your pillow, asshole."

"Thanks, dealer. Did your leader object to your extracurricular activities?"

"Fuck off. I hope you fall off and get eaten," the kid brushed his hair back out his eyes then spat at Alvin's feet before climbing back down the ladder.

"Yup, don't care if I save him," Alvin muttered, arranging the pillow as a cushion to brace his chest and arms on the lip of the roof. "Okay, let's

see what I can do."

Taking aim at the closest zombie a good fifty yards away, Alvin took a steadying breath. "Hold up," Randy called out, causing Alvin to lock up for a second. "I brought you some ear protection."

"You just took a few years off my life," Alvin replied with a deep sigh, taking the ear protectors and slipping them on. "Okay, starting up now."

"I'll just wait here, shall I?" Randy half-smirked, looking at the pistol.

Alvin ignored the comment and focused on the closest zombie again. He waited for the zombie to bump into the side of a car, which stopped it momentarily. He gently squeezed the trigger. The gun discharged, the recoil kicking the gun up and off line.

The shot hit the zombie in the chest, blowing a hole through its chest and splattering blood and gore all over the vehicle behind it. "Fuck," Alvin muttered as the twenty closest zombies turned towards the store and started shambling towards them.

Aiming at the approaching zombie, Alvin fired again, this time blowing the left side of its head off. Alvin gave a small nod as he shifted aim to the next closest zombie and fired twice before he put it down. It took three for the third zombie, so Alvin dropped the empty clip into his empty hand.

"That is not good marksmanship," Randy said, loudly enough to carry over the ear protection. "Means you can only get nine with the ammo you have." Alvin grunted as he slapped the empty mag back into the gun. "That clip is empty," Randy told him.

Alvin took aim and fired, cleanly killing the zombie he was aiming at. He began to methodically fire shot after shot, taking up to three shots in

some cases to kill the zombies as they came forward. As he dropped the clip for the second time Randy found his voice.

“What the fuck? How is that even possible?” Randy shouted.

“Magic,” Alvin replied as he put the empty clip back into the gun and fired again. “Bullshit game logic, whatever you want to call it.” He killed off the first twenty zombies then took a break, his wrists a little sore. “Break time.”

Randy just stood there, staring at him in disbelief, “It really is true, then.”

“Yeah. Sorry to shatter your world view.”

“But…” Randy seemed to have trouble wrapping his mind around what he’d seen.

“Told you it was going to be hard to deal with,” Alvin said as he holstered the pistol and massaged his wrists. “This is going to hurt rather badly by the time I’m done.”

“How the fuck does your gun fire without ammo?” Randy finally got out.

Alvin chuckled as he popped out the empty magazine, showing it to Randy before reloading it into the gun. He then dropped the magazine again, showing Randy the clip with ammo. “Same answer as before.”

Randy shook his head, “That doesn’t explain it, dick.”

“I can’t explain it better than I already tried,” Alvin replied.

“You can just keep reloading and killing them like that?” Randy asked.

“That is my plan currently,” Alvin agreed. “Going to take a few hours I would think, but once I’m ready you guys need to be ready to move. Once the way is clear I’ll go out with two people to get the vehicles and get them to the front of the store. We’ll need to set up guards while the bus is loaded. I could also use a wrist brace or two.”

Randy set aside the problem of a gun that reloaded itself in favor of focusing on the chance of escape that now stood before him. “I’ll go get them ready and make sure all the supplies are shifted to the front. I’ll bring up a set of braces.”

“You have time, still have a few hundred zombies to get through before I’ll be okay with going out.” Alvin grimaced as he turned back to the parking lot, “Okay, round two... Fight.”

Randy looked at Alvin’s back a little oddly before he retreated inside to get the others ready. He returned briefly to hand off wrist braces before he left again. Three hours later the supplies were all stacked by the front doors. Randy was about to go back up to the roof again to check on the progress of the zombie killing. As Randy got to the ladder Alvin was coming down.

“Okay, I think we’re good to go,” Alvin said with a grimace. The thousand rounds or so he had fired had put a major strain on his wrists, even with the braces. He knew they were slightly damaged, about as much as his back currently was. “You ready down here?”

“We have everything by the doors and made a small crawl space through the barricade to get out. They’ll dismantle the rest while we get the bus to the front. I’ve opted against getting the jeep as well.”

“If that’s what you want,” Alvin replied. “You have a hammer, screwdriver and wire cutters on you?”

“No,” Randy asked with a puzzled expression. “Why do we need them?”

“To get the bus started? It’s not like we have a key. I’ll go grab what I need, it’ll just be a minute or two.”

The other teen, the black kid with the saggy jeans, came over to Alvin, “You think this is going to work?”

“The parking lot is cleared enough of zombies at the moment. The bus will probably bring more over, but I’ll hold them off while you all load up.”

“You insane nigga?” The guy asked.

“That is one way of looking at it, certainly,” Alvin agreed as he looked over the group with suppressed laughter.

The group was eclectic for certain. A biker, a Hispanic guy, a young black teen, a white teen drug dealer, a meth addict, a scruffy looking guy with a bitten hand, an eight-year-old girl next to scruffy, a black middle-aged housewife, an Asian female of unknown age, a lanky white guy with thick glasses, and an old woman of possibly Native American descent.

“Well, this is certainly a Val-mart group if I ever saw it,” Alvin chuckled, earning a frown from the black teen. “You do realize running from zombies with your pants hanging off your ass is not a great idea, right?”

“Whatever,” the kid said as he turned to walk away.

“That look originated in prison, it was a flag to let the other inmates know the person was down for a little backdoor action.” Alvin said as the teen walked away.

“Fuck you, this is the way real homies represent,” the teen shot back as he strutted away towards the other teen and the addict. The trio all looked at him with derision.

Alvin just smirked back at them as he turned a corner of the aisle. He stopped in clothing, but couldn't find a jacket worth a damn. He did stick another set of jeans into his bag. He also found a pair of hiking boots in his size and after a quick trip through the magic bag had them on. A black cap with a bloody zombie face stitched onto it seemed too perfect, so after a trip through his magic bag he set it on his head.

Sporting goods was a bust, though he found the tools he wanted plus a selection of small flathead screwdrivers. It all went into a small toolbox to make it easier to carry. He went to the front of the store where the group of survivors were working on clearing a bigger path through the barricade.

"Randy, who's going out with me?"

"I am," Randy said as he stuffed another few shells for his gun into his pockets. "Just the two of us. The others will be moving shit so they have a path to load up when we bring the bus."

"Works," Alvin said, picking up the toolbox in his off hand. "Time to go to work. It hasn't even been a day since I last hotwired a car."

"Fucking scum," the addict mumbled as he went by.

Alvin laughed, shaking his head, "And yet I'm still trying to help a worthless druggie. Just don't smoke anything until we have the bus, okay sunshine?"

"Fuck you, man," the drug dealer spouted off.

Alvin ignored him as he ducked through the hole, out past the shattered doors and into the lot. He stood up fast pulling his gun as he did. No zombies for a few hundred yards, but he was still wary.

Randy came out behind him shaking his head, "Man, don't antagonize them please. They'll just try to attack you once we're on the road."

“Not me. You, maybe,” Alvin replied as they walked to the bus, keeping their eyes open. “Once you all get moving I’ll vanish,” Alvin told Randy. “If I was you, I would keep the other ones close as that trio will try to split them off from you.”

“They won’t last,” Randy grunted as his head kept turning, watching for approaching zombies.

“I know,” Alvin replied as they got to the bus. “You plan on killing them in the first week or later?”

Randy hesitated with a quick glance at Alvin, “You know?”

“The addict and the dealer will cause you too many issues. The one who stood with them will probably go with them. I suggest we get the jeep and you put them in it with some stuff. It makes it easy for them to split off and stops you from looking like the bad guy.”

“Huh. Okay, it’s a good idea. Let’s do it that way. You okay to get the jeep while I drive the bus over?”

“Sure. It’s the other way from the closest zombies.” Opening the door Alvin peered into the bus, then slammed a hammer into the floorboard. No sounds from the back of the bus, letting him breathe a sigh of relief. “Good, no zombies on board.”

“Wondered what the fuck that was about,” Randy said, watching as Alvin put the screwdriver next to the ignition and gave it a sharp whack with the hammer. “What the fuck?”

“Most old cars can be started this way, the ignitions are simple,” Alvin stated. He turned the screwdriver and the bus rumbled to life. “Okay, I’m off,” he got out, taking another screwdriver and the hammer with him. “See you at the front in a bit.” Alvin took off at a jog towards the jeep.

Randy was shaking his head as he climbed into the driver’s seat and closed the door. The bus lurched into movement as Randy began to

maneuver it towards the front. The bus lurched as he ran over a few downed bodies as if they were speedbumps.

Alvin got to the jeep as Randy reached the front doors. After another quick tap of the hammer onto the second screwdriver, he had it running. He drove it over to the main doors, where the group was beginning to load the bus. He left the jeep idling as he took up a position between the bus and the zombies that had started towards them from the far side of the massive shopping area.

“I’ll give you more time,” Alvin told Randy. “Once you guys are ready, take off.”

“You want us to leave you here?” Randy said it loud enough for everyone to hear. Alvin knew why and approved of Randy’s play.

“Leave me and go, once you’re packed and have people in both vehicles. I’ll find my own way from here.”

“Why?” someone asked.

“The will of God?” Alvin said it as a partial question then shrugged. “It just is. Now hurry up, I can’t kill them all.” He started walking towards the zombies, aware of all the eyes on his back.

“I hope he gets eaten,” the dealer said loud enough to be heard, but Alvin didn’t reply.

Alvin moved to the far side of the building and started killing zombies, a few shots at a time and reloading as he went. Almost an hour later, or another hundred zombies if you counted it that way, Alvin heard the bus’s engine shift as it was put into gear. He looked back to see Randy getting the bus moving towards the closest exit.

Randy made eye contact to give Alvin a nod then concentrated on driving. Alvin became aware of the little girl watching out of the back window, looking scared. He gave her a friendly wave with a smile.

“Get eaten, asshole,” the dealer yelled as he put the jeep into gear and spun the tires.

Alvin cocked his head to the side as he watched them go, and flipped them off with a smile, “Have fun with the zombies.”

“Fuck you, dick,” the saggy teen yelled, flipping him off in return.

Alvin shook his head as he watched both vehicles reach the street. “Fuck,” he muttered, “I should have grabbed some chili or something else with flavor.”

A moment later white light enveloped him, returning him to his room. A deep breath escaped him as he slumped onto his bunk. His wrists ached from the constant firing he’d done. “I hope those three die,” Alvin said.

Chapter Ten

"You survived again," Scott greeted Alvin, his tone betraying some surprise.

"It really wasn't difficult, just use my brain and have a never-ending gun," Alvin replied, rubbing at his wrists. "Though it is bruise inducing to fire that many shots. At least for me. It's not like I used guns that much in my life, before now that is."

"I know," Scott put in, "you barely touched a gun after killing..."

"I think I should check my XP," Alvin interjected cutting Scott off.

Mission Summary: Story Mission Successfully Completed.
Total Experience Earned: 5,410 XP
Breakdown: Mission XP 500, Shamblers killed 2410 XP,
Survivors bonus 1100 XP, Loot bonus 1400 XP.

Alvin whistled, "Now that is a nice haul." He pulled up his total XP and grinned over the total: 6,760 XP. "Now we can do some work." Just as the words left his mouth a pop-up appeared in front of him.

You have unlocked World Mode!
Are you ready to brave the world that has been left behind?
(Not that you get the choice.)

"Hey, Scott?" Alvin chuckled.

"What?" The petulance in his voice was clearly evident.

"It's time for your name to be changed. I've unlocked World Mode." Silence greeted this pronouncement. "Are you ready to change it up?"

“Fuck you,” was Scott’s simple terse reply.

“Good. Now let me see, what should I call you?” Alvin sat back on his bunk for a moment.

“Scott works,” Scott put in.

“No, I’m going to change it. I’m thinking Betty is a good one, but I have another one in mind as well. So, being the kind and caring person that I am, I’ll let you choose. Betty, or the mystery name. Which one do you want?” Alvin’s laughter echoed slightly in the small room.

“You’re an ass.”

“I’ll give you ten seconds to choose, then I’ll pick for you,” Alvin replied. “Ten, nine, eight…”

“Mystery,” Scott cut in.

“Mystery name it is! From today forward you shall be,” he paused for drama before continuing, “Jarvis,” Alvin intoned formally.

“Jarvis? As in Ironman’s AI butler?” Jarvis asked, the voice warping as it asked the question.

“Yes. You are, sort of like a butler, plus you’re an AI.”.”

“You are an ass, sir,” Jarvis replied his voice settling into the formal refined tones of an English butler.

“Why thank you, Jarvis,” Alvin laughed. “Now I think I’ll spend my XP and then call it a night. It’s off to World Mode tomorrow and I need my beauty sleep.”

“You could never sleep long enough,” Jarvis intoned.

“Who’s the ass here?” Alvin queried as he pulled up the store menu. “But first, time for some shopping.”

He looked over his options, dithering on what he really wanted for some time. He was sure that World Mode would offer more opportunities at gear, unlike the stilted Story Missions. If he was going to do World Mode, though, he would really need more space for stuff. Anything he wanted to upgrade would need to come back here with him and his fanny pack was only four slots.

He bought a backpack for six more slots of carry space, which ate most of his funds. Next, he checked the clothing he had picked up at Val-Mart to see if he could upgrade them and if so what kind of upgrades were available.

Zombie Cap (Rare)
Armor: 0
Durability: 50/50
Upgradable: 0/6

Hiking Boots (uncommon)
Armor: 2
Durability: 25/25
Upgradable: 0/4

Denim Jeans (common)
Armor: 2
Durability: 25/25
Upgradeable: 0/2

He was surprised the quality of both the hat and boots. A rare item and an uncommon, it seemed a bit much to be finding in a Val-Mart. Shaking his head, he pulled up the list of possible upgrades for the new items.

Increased Armor (rank 1): Increases Armor of the item by 2 (more Armor, are you afraid of damage?). Cost: 500 XP.

Increased Armor (rank 2): Requires rank 1. Increases Armor of the item by 4 (4 is better than 2, unless it's zombies). Cost: 1,000 XP.

Increased Armor (rank 3): Requires rank 2. Increases Armor of the item by 6 (seriously, do you fear death or something?). Cost: 2,000 XP.

Increased Armor (rank 4): Requires rank 3. Increases Armor of the item by 8 (okay buddy, maybe think about less Armor and more utility). Cost: 4,000 XP.

Increased Armor (rank 5): Requires rank 4. Increases Armor of the item by 10 (what, do you want to live forever?). Cost: 10,000 XP.

Durability (rank 1): Increase base durability by a multiple of five (much harder to break, isn't it?). Cost: 500 XP.

Durability (rank 2): Requires rank 1. Increased base durability by multiple of ten (also auto cleans all blood and gore immediately). Cost: 5,000 XP.

Surprise Storage (rank 1): Imbues the item with the ability to store an item, like a bag (Hey, Rocky, watch me pull a rabbit out of my hat!). Cost: 2,000 XP.

Surprise Storage (rank 2): Requires rank 1. Imbues the item with two spots of storage space (two for over double the cost, what a deal). Cost: 5,000 XP.

All Weather: Water proofing, thermal insulation and cooling all in one upgrade (best deal if you ask us, but of course you didn't). Cost: 250 XP.

Alvin grunted as he looked over the list, “Fuck, now that’s a lot of stuff.” He started laughing. “If I could upgrade Armor on this hat all the way I could take a shot to the face from my pistol and not die.”

“That is correct,” Jarvis replied. “The Armor from clothing is subtracted first when you take damage, then your health is deducted.”

“How does the durability work for clothing?”

“Every time you take damage, the Armor for that area loses a point of durability,” Jarvis intoned in his new, dry voice. “I should add a thank you, Sir, for not making me Betty. I can work with this at least.”

“Oh, a thank you. You are quite welcome, Jarvis.” Alvin replied, then started applying upgrades to his gear, checking the stats of them when he finished.

Zombie Cap (Rare)
Armor: 4
Durability: 250/250
Upgradable: 3/6

Hiking Boots (Uncommon)
Armor: 4
Durability: 125/125
Upgradable: 2/4

Denim Jeans (Common)
Armor: 4
Durability: 25/25
Upgradeable: 1/2

“Upgraded Armor for all of them, doubled on the hat. Then increased durability for the hat and boots. That works for now,” Alvin said.

“Increasing your stats is a very important idea,” Jarvis replied.

“Well, I’m tapped out for now. I have a whole 260 XP left,” Alvin replied, getting up to use the toilet. “Think I’ll catch a nap, eat something, and then decide what I want to do.” Once he finished his business he laid on the bunk and curled up on the hard slab. “Need to buy pillow, mattress and blanket soon.”

“Only if you care for comfort, sir.” The lights dimmed as Alvin closed his eyes.

Alvin woke with a grimace. Not only were his wrists aching, also his neck was stiff and his back complained about the lack of cushion. Grumbling, he swung himself into a sitting position so he could stretch out his back and try to work the kinks out of his neck.

“Did you sleep well?” Jarvis asked in a neutral professional tone.

“About as well as anyone could in my situation,” Alvin grumbled as he reached for the ibuprofen. He swallowed a few of the pills with water from the sink, hoping they would dull his aches and pains. “Going to hit World Mode today.” He tossed the pills into his backpack.

“This is where it really starts,” Jarvis reminded him.

“I want the great big world open to me,” Alvin answered as he ordered a bowl of sustenance from the store. “First though, some sludge. I’m still upset I didn’t grab a can of pork and beans or something at the Val-Mart.”

“You prioritized gear,” Jarvis replied.

“Yeah,” Alvin sat on his bunk to eat his sludge. Once he was done, he used the restroom and stretched one more time, feeling his muscles easing up from the stiffness from earlier. “Well Jarvis, I’m off. Watch the house and don’t buy any encyclopedias from random strangers.”

“I don’t understand,” Jarvis said after a brief pause.

“I didn’t think you would get the reference. It’s an old joke from a British comedy troupe known as Monty Python.” Alvin pulled open the job board, his finger hovering over the button for World Mode. “If I don’t make it back, Jarvis, make sure to eat my personality.” Before Jarvis could reply Alvin jammed his finger on the button and the light enveloped him.

When the light cleared, Alvin found himself in a small public restroom. He briefly examined the graffiti and random scrawls on the stalls next to him. He turned off the water from the faucet before him, which was running as if he had been using the sink. He could hear people outside the door, but no sounds of panic and the lights were all working as well which meant it wasn’t zombie time at the moment. He did a brief check of his gear to find he had everything. Fanny pack and backpack were both accounted for, his 1911 was on his hip in the holster. His pockets were full of the looted items from the hospital. He glanced down at the gold Rolex on his wrist for the time, 10:20.

Alvin took a breath to steady his nerves before he went through the door. He turned out to be in a truck stop diner. There was a haggard middle-aged woman behind the counter looking like she would rather die than be at work, her name tag read Flo. The cook behind her visible through the service window was the prototypical bald, overweight fry cook, albeit of African instead of European descent. The only other visible person was a man of Hispanic descent sitting at the counter holding a cup of coffee between his hands.

Not seeing anything to cause alarm, Alvin gave the waitress who glared at him a nod. The TV was blaring something about the Pope about to give an emergency address to the masses. Alvin started to walk through the diner aiming for the front door when the man at the counter turned slightly, his eyes meeting Alvin’s, “You should sit, we need to talk.”

Pausing Alvin shook his head, “Sorry, but I need to go.”

“Go where though? You need to hear what I have to tell you before the end comes,” the man turned his head more, the priest collar on his neck becoming visible.

“Sorry, Father, but I’m not a religious man,” Alvin stated simply, taking another step.

“God still has need of you, even if you don’t have need of him, son. Please sit, there is little time left,” the priest urged.

Alvin would normally have blown the guy off and kept going, but knowing this was a game he also knew he should stop. Frowning, Alvin sat down, keeping a seat between him and the priest, “I’ll give you a few minutes, Father.”

“Not a Father, not any more, my job is all but done. His Holiness is about to warn the world but they won’t listen. We know this, but still we try. The end is upon the world, the Rapture is about to come.” The priest took a sip from his coffee and the waitress came over to fill it up for him.

“You having anything, or you just using the bathroom and running?” the waitress asked in a snide tone to Alvin.

“Wish I could, but I don’t have cash on me,” Alvin replied.

The priest dropped a thick wad of bills on the counter, “Give him whatever he wants.”

The waitress picked up the wad with a broad grin, as she looked from the priest to Alvin, “So what do you want?”

“Cheesy bacon fries and a coke,” Alvin replied looking at the priest, not the waitress. “You mean the literal Rapture?”

“Yes, the spirits of the pure are going to be taken in a few minutes. You have one task set before you from the Almighty. You, Alvin Leon Lambert, are tasked with helping those who wish to survive. You must set up places of refuge and help them learn to survive the world that is to come. You will have access to things almost magical in nature to aid you in this

task. But beware, all of the old evils will be freed to walk upon the Earth, along with myths long gone.”

“Your coke,” the waitress said, putting a drink in front of Alvin as she turned to the priest. “So, you’re saying we are all damned, then? Typical priest.”

The priest just smiled and turned his eyes to the TV, where the Pope, John Paul II, stood with microphone before him, as he addressed St. Peter’s Square. “The Lord came to me in a dream. He came to all of those who serve Him directly, be they Christian, Mormon, Jew. He came to warn us that today the Rapture would be upon us. The time is now! We did not want to believe, but we must accept His will. In just three minutes those who truly believe and those free of sin will be taken up into His arms. To those who are left behind, do not despair! You will face many dangers and trials in the days ahead, but still you may return to God’s grace.” The Pope paused as he looked at the crowd with sad eyes before he continued.

The waitress put a plate of fries in front of Alvin with a bottle of ketchup, distracting Alvin from the news, “Huh? You believe this shit?”

Alvin poured ketchup all over the fries and dug into them with gusto. Finally, he had something tasty to eat again. He jingled the empty glass at the waitress for a refill.

The priest sighed as he laid his head down on the bar top, “It is almost time. Your struggle shall be hard and fraught with grief, Alvin. If you turn from your duty, though, this world will surely perish, and all of those left in it.”

The waitress brought back Alvin’s glass, freshly filled, “Look, mister priest guy, you saying that the Pope is telling the truth? That’s just crazy.”

Lifting his head, the priest met her eyes, sadness etched deeply into his face. “I’m sorry, I didn’t have time to try to save you, child.” With that the priest toppled backwards off the stool.

The waitress screamed and stepped back, her eyes going wide, “Is he okay?”

The power cut off right at that moment, prompting curses from the kitchen. Alvin took another bite of fries before wiping his hands clean with a napkin. He pulled his gun with his right hand as he took up his soda with his left hand. “He is, but we aren’t,” Alvin replied, taking a drink. He glanced at the Rolex watch, 10:27. The TV had had a scrolling bar during the news event showing the date as September 22, 2000. The morning light streamed through the diner’s windows, providing enough light to see by. Alvin stood up and backed away from the priest.

“Why do you have a gun?” the waitress screamed as she looked at him with big eyes.

“To deal with those that won’t stay dead,” Alvin replied as the priest groaned and began to sit up.

“He’s alive?” the waitress went around the counter to help the priest.

“Don’t do that,” Alvin told her.

“Look buddy, why don’t you just leave,” the cook said as he came out of the back, holding his chef knife at the ready.

“I really should,” Alvin said as he backed slowly away.

“Are you okay?” the waitress asked as she got closer to the priest, who was slowly getting to his feet in a jerky manner. She suddenly screamed again as she finally got a good look at the priest’s face and went to back away.

Lunging forward, the former priest grabbed the waitress and bit her neck, ripping away a chunk of flesh right over the artery. The blood fountained, spraying a window and the zombie with her blood. The light inside the diner took on a reddish cast. The cook gasped and jumped the

counter clumsily, to ‘save’ the waitress. All he managed to do was land badly in front of the zombie, who dropped the waitress before reaching down for him.

Alvin watched the last few seconds with apathy, knowing that it had been all but destined to go that way. He racked a bullet into the chamber and brought the gun to bear on the zombie priest. The cook had stabbed it in the face, managing to stab it in the eye and into the brain by sheer luck.

“I killed him?” the cook asked as the body slumped to the floor with the knife buried in its head.

“One of them, yes,” Alvin replied as he watched the waitress lurch to her feet and grab the cook before he could pull the trigger.

“Oh gods, help me please,” the cook screamed.

Alvin took aim, but his first shot was low catching the zombie in the shoulder, which slid it an inch sideways. The zombie didn’t pause. It pulled the cook up, trying to bite the man in the neck. The cook squirmed as he yelled for help, making the zombie miss his neck. The zombie bit a chunk out of his shoulder, going right through the man’s shirt with no difficulty. Alvin took two steps forward to get into a better position, he hadn’t had to shoot a zombie with a live person close by before.

Still screaming, the cook slammed his fists into the zombie’s head repeatedly even as it took another chunk for the same shoulder, “Fuck! I don’t want to die!”

Alvin’s next shot blew through the zombie’s head, killing it instantly. He stepped back from the cook, who had collapsed to the ground clutching his shoulder and sobbing. The cook wasn’t likely to live long with his wounds, but he felt he should try to assist the man at least a little. Holstering the gun, Alvin stepped forward slightly, “Hey, you still want help?”

The cook just sobbed as he curled into a ball in response.

Alvin shook his head before he turned to leave. He paused to finish his drink before he walked out of the diner. An old, grey-haired guy with a nasty scar on his cheek was walking toward the diner. "You don't want to go in there," Alvin told the guy.

"Did you hurt Flo and Bob?" the man asked, hefting the two-foot iron bar in his hand.

"The priest killed Flo, the cook killed the priest, I killed the second zombie and then the cook refused my help," Alvin replied as he sidestepped away from the door.

"Flo is dead?" the trucker asked with a shocked expression.

"Did you not hear what I just said?" Alvin asked taking a few more steps. "Didn't you listen to the news a minute ago?"

"You mean the Pope's radio message? Why should I listen to him? I'm not Catholic."

Grimacing Alvin shook his head, "You're on your own." He walked away at an angle that let him keep the man in sight.

"Scum," the trucker spat before he went into the diner.

Alvin watched him go, then took a moment to look around at his surroundings. All he could see was a long empty stretch of road running north and south. The only plant life in sight was scrub, which reminded him of the western US. He turned back to look at the diner and saw the attached fueling area for trucks, as well as a convenience store and pumps for cars set just a short way from the restaurant. There was only the one rig, which didn't have a trailer in the parking area for trucks, and a Nissan sat in one of the parking spots near the convenience store and gas station area.

Alvin went towards the c-store, hoping he could get some supplies before he began to walk. As he got to the door of the store though, he

paused as he could see the clerk moving jerkily inside. He didn't want to be accused of murder by the trucker, so he went back towards the diner. As he neared the doors he heard muffled shouts followed by a loud thump. Alvin jerked the doors open to see the trucker standing over the body of the cook, whose head was now caved in.

"He turned into a zombie?" Alvin asked from the doorway.

Looking up with wide panicky eyes, the trucker jerked his head in a nod, "He clutched his chest and stopped breathing then a few seconds later tried to bite my hand."

"Welcome to the end of the world," Alvin replied. "You going to be able to hold it together?"

"I killed him…"

"It, you killed it," Alvin said sternly. "That was a zombie, not a human being."

"Bob was a good man, though. Why'd he have to die?" the trucker asked, his voice going as numb as his face, the metal rod in his hands clattering to the bloody floor.

"Okay, so you're a broken one then," Alvin sighed. "Fucking shit, why couldn't David and Gothy have been here? At least they kept it together. Hell, even the secretary being strangled and raped by her boss did better than you." He stepped back, letting the door close behind him as he went for the store, since he no longer had any reason not to shoot the clerk. "Ugh, this has not been a good start." He stomped back around to the store just as the zombie shattered the glass door and staggered through the frame.

The zombie regained its feet and walked towards him. Its jerking walk was noticeably faster than the zombies he'd encountered so far. It was moving at a normal walking speed, which made Alvin blink as he brought the gun up. "Well, fuck, they got faster," he said as he pulled the trigger with the zombie ten feet away. The back of its skull blew out as the bullet

ripped through its brain and exited at high speed. The spray of blood and brain painted the asphalt with gore, which the zombie toppled backward into.

“Well, that clears the last hurdle here,” Alvin said as he went to the broken door and entered the c-store. He grabbed two bottles of water, tossing them into his backpack. He paused as he noticed a small interface window appear next to the bag. It showed the ibuprofen bottle as well as a single bottle of water, with a small number two overlaid on it. Chuckling, he grabbed more bottles of water and put them into the bag. Number six slotted into a different slot, so Alvin pulled that one back out. “Stackable up to a certain amount, good to know.” He set that bottle aside, and started dropping bags of jerky into his backpack. He stacked four of the same jerky before he tried to add a different flavor, only to have the second flavor take an empty spot. He nodded, and swapped out the odd flavor for a fifth package of the same sort he already had. He added another stack of waters into it, which left two open spots.

“Water and food, check,” Alvin said as he grabbed a Twinkie and ate it, in a silent homage to a movie from his youth. “What else do I need?” He grabbed a flashlight, putting batteries in it before storing it in the fanny pack next to the bat, hammer and screwdriver he still had. He gave the store a quick search, not finding anything else of worth. When he stepped out of the store, the trucker looked up from the dead body of the clerk. “It attacked, so I put it down.”

“You will just kill anyone, won’t you?” the trucker spat, the bloody bar from before in his hand.

Alvin rested his hand on his gun as he watched the trucker. “I don’t like where this is going. Why don’t you just go on back to your truck and this doesn’t end badly for you. At least, not yet.”

“You monster, this is all your fault,” the trucker raged, spittle flying from his lips. “Everything was fine until you came. If I kill you, maybe…”

Alvin didn't wait for more. He pulled the gun and fired a single shot center mass on the trucker. The trucker went tumbling back, the blood that came pumping out of his body making it clear he wouldn't last long if that shot hadn't killed him outright. Alvin took quick steps over to the body, to find the trucker staring up at him, gasping his face scrunched in pain.

"You did this…" blood came pouring out of the trucker's mouth, choking off anything further.

"You did this to yourself," Alvin replied to the body, as he fired his next shot into the head of the dead trucker.

He waited a few minutes, but the body didn't reanimate, "Good, a shot to the head stops them from coming back." He dug through the trucker's pockets, coming up with the keys to the truck. "I wonder how hard it is to remember how to drive one of those things?" Alvin mused as he started for the big rig that didn't have a trailer.

He found the owner's manual and took a few minutes to look through it before he started the truck. It was a rig from 1972, for which he was thankful, as it was useful unlike most of the newer vehicles in the Story Missions he had been doing. It took him a bit to get the hang of driving the rig, as he had to remember how to double clutch. That year of living on the horse ranch with one of his foster families was finally paying off.

He eventually pulled the truck around to the diesel pumps, hoping he was right about his idea. He found the generator for the building around back and got it running. Once it was up he went back into the c-store and turned the diesel pumps on so he could use them. He was really glad this place still used a really old system for the pumps. He grabbed the fuel canisters the c-store sold and filled each of them with diesel gas, stacking them in the rig's passenger floorboard. Next, he started filling all the ice chests he could find with water and non-perishable food. He piled as many of them as he could into the rig's sleeper area.

Once he'd stocked the rig, he fueled the monster. After he was done, he turned off the generator, just in case anyone else came by and wanted to

try to fuel their cars as well. He left a note inside near the register, with instructions on how to do what he had done. Climbing back into the seat of the rig, he started the truck up and got it moving. He paused at the exit, debating which way he should go, wondering if the world he was in was even close to the world he had known. Finally, he turned right and headed south.

He cruised slowly, doing about thirty as the rig was not handling well without a trailer. A little over an hour later he came to an onramp for I-70. He took the branch going east, as he figured that should take him towards the Rockies and away from California, hopefully. He had no desire to go to that overly crowded state, while the Rockies might give him a place to set up a rural community if he stayed away from Denver.

He came to the first wreck on the interstate after just a few minutes. A single car accident had occurred, but two other vehicles were stopped nearby. As Alvin slowed to assess the situation he could see the jerky movement of zombies and pressed the accelerator down. He wasn't going to stop for zombies right now. He jerked in surprise a few minutes later when the CB crackled to life.

"Anyone alive out there?" The question was full of static.

Alvin picked up the radio, "I don't know any of the lingo, but I'm out here."

"Where are you and which way you headed?"

"I-70, headed east. No idea as to where exactly, though."

"If you're hearing me, then you're only a few miles away. I'm in Green River."

"Well, I might be coming that way. How is the town?"

"Zombies everywhere, don't know what happened. Most of the town is fucked. At the moment it's just me, holed up in my room."

“What’s your name?”

“Patrick Walker.”

“I’ll let you know once I hit town, stay as quiet as you can until then.”

“Who are you?”

“Call me Al, over and out.”

The CB fell quiet again as he drove. A sign came into view, indicating that Green River was only five miles away. He grabbed a water from a cooler, downing it quickly before tossing the empty back into the cooler. As he got closer to town he had to slow to pick his way through the massive pile-up around the junction. He took his time, gently shoving cars aside when he needed to. He smashed at least one zombie into a car that way.

“Pat?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m almost at the town. The streets are a bit of a mess, though.”

“Yeah, the little bit I saw before I locked up looked pretty fucked.”

“How do I get to you and do you know of any safe place?”

“There’s a retired Vet who has a cabin about five miles out of town to the north. He can probably hear us about now, so he might give us a place to stay that’s safer than here.”

“We can check. How do I get to you?”

“From Main Street go north. I can see the road from my window. When you get close, I can let you know.”

“North off of Main street... Fuck. Main street is a wreck. It’s going to take me a bit to find a way around this cluster. If you see an old rig without a trailer that will be me.”

“Copy,” Patrick said, and went silent again.

Alvin did his best to maneuver around the side streets until he could cross Main street going North. Just as he was passing a two-story house built in the fifties his radio came alive again. “Al, stop the truck, that’s my house.”

“Well then, you better hurry,” Alvin replied as he parked the truck. He would need to shift stuff, since the floorboard on the passenger side was full of fuel canisters and ice chests took up most of the rest of the space.

As he worked, a forty-year-old man with glasses and bad acne came from the house. He carried an old double barrel side-by-side shotgun in his pudgy hands as he jogged to the truck. The guy looked into the truck past Alvin and froze at the mountain of stuff piled inside.

“Yeah, I didn’t think that part through,” Alvin admitted. “Keep the gas cans and as much of the food as you can, otherwise start shifting things until you can fit. It doesn’t have to be comfortable either, if we’re only going five miles out of town. I’ll stand guard while you do.”

“I think…” Patrick started, then stopped when he saw the 1911 strapped to Alvin’s hip. “Yeah, I only have a handful of birdshot, so maybe it’s best if you guard.”

Alvin turned away from Patrick, looking back the way he had come to see zombies walking towards them. The distinctive noise of both of the shotgun’s barrels being cocked was all the warning Alvin got. It was enough for him to dive forward, which meant most of the blast missed him as Patrick had been aiming at his head. Not pausing, Alvin rolled over

pulling the gun and emptied the clip into Patrick, who was fumbling to reload the shotgun. Getting to his feet, Alvin ejected the clip and slapped it back into the gun before stepping over to Patrick to put a final round through his head.

“Stupid son of a bitch,” Alvin cussed as he touched the back of his head. It hurt, and a small spot of blood came away on his hand, along with a single small pellet. He quickly piled the few items he had removed from the truck back into it. A quick search of Patrick’s body turned up nothing of interest besides a handful of shells for the shotgun. He grabbed the shells and the gun before getting back into the truck and starting it up. He pulled away as the zombies got within fifty feet of the truck.

He started north and hoped the Vet was a better person than Patrick had been. He ended up behind the only other moving vehicle he had seen since coming to World Mode. It was a familiar looking truck, and Alvin felt a smile pulling up the corners of his mouth as he felt a small kernel of hope blossom.

Chapter Eleven

Alvin followed the truck down the road for about a mile when it turned off onto a dirt road. Alvin turned along behind it. When he did, the truck came to a sudden stop, forcing Alvin to brake quickly or hit the truck. He got the rig stopped and looked up to see Bill already out of his truck, pulling a rifle up to his shoulder as he faced Alvin. Alvin rolled down his window and stuck his hands out, “Hey, Bill, can you not point that thing at me, please? I would consider it a courtesy since I helped you at the hospital.”

Bill lowered the point of aim, but didn’t lower the weapon, “Step out of the truck.”

“I’m feeling a little skittish about that. Someone already tried to shoot me today. I will, but please at least lower the barrel a bit more,” Alvin replied.

Bill squinted, trying to get a clear look into the rig. He lowered the weapon so it was aimed at the ground, but still cocked and still ready to be pulled up instantly. “I’ll give you a minute. If you aren’t out of the truck by then I will fire.”

“And here I thought I was the unreasonable one,” Alvin groused as he set the brakes before opening the door and getting out. By the time his feet hit dirt, Bill had the rifle up again. “Now this doesn’t look good.”

“Do you have a twin?” Bill asked.

“No, Bill, I don’t have a twin. You have a good-looking daughter, though, who was worried about you. You helped me kill a number of zombies in a hospital.”

“Al? We left you in the parking lot and you said you were going to be there for some time. So how is it that you’re here with a big-rig?” Bill hadn’t lowered the gun again yet.

“You are making me all kinds of nervous, Bill. I can answer that question, but you might not like the answer. Can we agree to a truce for a few minutes? And by that I mean not pointing guns at me.”

“Dad, he helped us,” Susan said from the other side of the truck. “Put the gun down. It would be better for us to get to the cabin, so we can talk in a secure location.”

Bill grunted as he stared at Alvin, clearly not trusting he was who he said he was. “You’re being too trusting again,” Bill told his daughter, but he lowered the rifle and eased the hammer down. “Follow us,” he said, backing away from Alvin until he reached the door of his truck.

Alvin got back into the rig and followed after the pick-up for about four miles. As they approached the structure, Alvin snorted. “That is not a cabin,” Alvin muttered. Alvin could see a ten foot tall fence of cinderblocks. Each corner sported a flat, roofed guard post equipped with spotlights. A single concrete rooftop was visible beyond the fence. “Not Fort Knox, but probably a damn sight better than most places.”

Susan got out of the truck and moved the double gate out of the way, allowing them to roll through. She closed them up behind them. Bill parked the truck just inside on a gravel area and motioned Alvin to do the same. Once he was parked, Alvin got out of the rig to find Bill three feet away, his hand resting on the pistol on his hip.

“Please, not again,” Alvin said, holding his hands palm up. “Look, I already took a shotgun blast to the back of the head today. I don’t want any more.”

Bill eyed him with doubt, “Sure you did. Now explain how you caught up to us this far outside of Provo with a rig.”

“Inside, Dad,” Susan scolded him and came in between them. “You helped us get out of the hospital, and I am as curious as my father. To make us all feel better, will you hand over the pistol to me while we talk?”

“Do you promise not to shoot me with it?” Alvin joked.

“I will not shoot you with the pistol,” Susan told him, her lips creasing up slightly, “I prefer shotguns.”

Snorting, Alvin shrugged, “I need to earn some trust at some point, might as well be now.” He unclipped the holster from his belt and held it out to Susan. “I’d like it back, it has sentimental value now.”

Bill glowered at Alvin, “For the few hours you had it?”

“Good, that means you’re starting to accept that I’m me,” Alvin replied. “I am at your mercy now that I am unarmed. Well, ungunned anyway. I still have my bat.”

“Follow me, please,” Susan told him as she put the gun on her hip and led them towards the house. “We’ll talk inside, where it’s safer.”

Alvin followed, trying not to be too obvious about enjoying the view since Bill was right behind him. Alvin’s gaze drifted off the fit posterior in front of him to the building. It was a concrete block with what looked like a submarine door set in it. There were no windows, and it didn’t look big enough to be a dwelling. He watched as Susan unlocked the door with a unique looking key then swung it open to the side. She went in down a steep ramp, the other two following after her. Inside, the walls were wood paneled and the floor was concrete with rugs covering it periodically.

“Welcome to the cabin,” Susan said as she led him down a hall that had obvious firing slots to either side. After fifteen feet, they came to another hatch. She pulled it open, leading him into something resembling a normal family room. “While you two talk, I’ll see about getting some water.”

Bill grunted as he went to stand next to a wooden rocking chair, "Well, Mr. Might Be Al, why don't you start by telling me how we met."

Alvin played along, describing the hospital as best he could. He also mentioned Bill's tattoo on his left butt cheek. "I doubt many people have seen you naked to know about that."

"He has you there, Dad," Susan chuckled as she came back in with three glasses of water. She took a seat in the rocking chair with a glass. "So now can you explain how you managed to catch up to us so easily?"

"It's going to sound a little crazy, but I'm going to ask you to listen to the whole thing. When I finish, I can offer some proof, outside where a gun can be fired."

Bill raised a single eyebrow as he sipped his water, "This ought to be good."

Alvin sipped the water, finding it cool but with an odd taste, "What is wrong with this water?"

"Well water," Bill replied, "never had real water before?"

"Been a city boy for most of my life," Alvin replied. "Cities are going to be a relic of the past here real soon." He took a big gulp then took a seat on the sofa getting his thoughts in order, then began his story. He'd finished his water by the time he told them the tale, starting from when he woke up in the concrete room, leaving out a few details he considered private. "I know you probably don't believe me, but you have my gun, Susan. Let's step outside. You can fire off the clip, then drop and reload the empty and go right on firing."

Bill eyed Alvin as if he suspected that parts of the story had been left out, but motioned Alvin towards the door. He followed after his daughter as the trio walked back to the front of the house, with Alvin having to step aside for Susan to undo the heavy bolt locks on the outer-

most door. As they came back out into sunlight it struck Alvin that the bunker had lights on inside.

“Curious as to why you guys have light? All the other power is out.”

“Generators,” Bill said simply before he nodded to his daughter, who pulled the gun.

Susan aimed off to the side of the house, where a berm was raised with a few targets set up. She fired off the seven rounds in the clip in rapid succession, Alvin hearing the ding of the metal target being struck for each pull of the trigger. She ejected the mag then reseated it quickly and fired off another seven rounds. She stopped at that point and looked at the gun in her hands with speculation.

Bill held out his hand. Susan wordlessly handed off the gun to him. Bill ejected the magazine, examining it carefully before he put the empty clip back in the gun. He dropped the slide, bringing it up and firing off seven rounds at the target, each round striking true. Bill dropped the magazine out to look at it again before putting it back in the gun and handing it back to Alvin. Susan held out the holster for it.

“Okay, can you do that to all of our guns?” Bill asked as he pulled a can of chew from his back pocket.

“In theory, yes. In actuality, not so much. It costs me XP as I explained, I need to use that for everything I do. As such, it would not be great for me to use all my XP to upgrade your guns.”

Susan looked at Alvin for a long moment, “You aren’t being very helpful here.”

“Yeah, maybe, but I just think it’s my low Personability. Look, I need a place where I can start to set up a safe zone for people. How about we bargain? I’ll see about upgrading some of your guns and you let me use your bunker as the start of a safe zone.”

Bill glowered, “You want to bring unknown people onto my land?”

“Fuck,” Alvin muttered, “I really need to raise my Personability stat. Yes, but maybe not into the bunker itself right away. We can work it out once I get an agreement from you. What would you want in trade, to use the fenced in area as a safe zone for others?”

“Twenty guns set up like yours,” Bill answered without pause.

Alvin let out a whistle, “Now that is a high order. I’m not opposed to it per se, but it will take me more than a few days to do that. Plus, I’ll need to go out and get XP from killing zombies. I’ll also need a safe place to sleep each time I go to make your guns like mine.”

“We can offer you a room inside the cabin,” Susan said, cutting Bill off as he started to object. “Stop it, Dad. He helped us and I trust him even if he does seem a little off.” She turned back to Alvin, “Once you’ve given us three improved guns you can start to bring people inside the fence.”

“That okay with you, Bill?” Alvin asked, which got him a nod from Bill and a dirty look from Susan for questioning her word.

Alvin held out his hand, which Bill took in his pulverizing grip. They shook once, Alvin trying not to wince. Alvin turned to Susan, “You made this possible, thank you Susan.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly but she nodded, “Don’t make me regret my decision.”

“I’ll try not to,” Alvin replied simply. “Can I get help unloading the stuff from the truck? After that I’d like to take a nap to check on what this will all cost me. I’ll need the first three guns you want upgraded, as well.”

“I’ll help with the truck,” Bill replied. “Susan, go get your favorite, also grab the Ol’ Tom and my ivory 1911. Put those in the room for him, then get dinner started. We can eat before he takes his nap.”

Susan left the two men outside. As the door closed behind her, Bill turned to Alvin, “If you do anything to hurt her…”

Holding up both hands Alvin cut in, “I won’t. As a rule, I don’t hurt those who help me, more over if they’re female. Now, if she tried to stab me in the back that would be different, but I don’t believe your daughter was raised that way.”

“Damn right she wasn’t,” Bill said as he started for the rig. “Sunlight is burning, let’s get this done.”

An hour later they had the truck unloaded and all the gear stacked by the front door. Bill brought out a cart to load everything onto so they could haul it to the kitchen, minus the fuel. Alvin was impressed by the kitchen and pantry. It seemed already well stocked, but Alvin’s additional supplies disappeared quickly as they put everything away as Susan directed. Once they were done she served them a simple meal of steak and baked potato. Alvin made happy noises, glad to have real food again. Bill showed Alvin the bathroom, then the room set aside for him after they’d eaten. He made use of the facilities, then went to his room. It was a small room, ten feet square and illuminated by a single bulb in the ceiling. The three guns were laid out on the bed. He unloaded the water and jerky from his backpack, put the guns inside it then flopped down onto the soft bed. He lay there for a few minutes, thinking he should get undressed but unable to muster up the energy for it.

A small pop-up asking if he wanted to return to his room appeared. Next to it was a ten-minute timer that was counting down. He tapped the button to accept and a split second later the light engulfed him. He sat up from his bunk in his small, unadorned room. “Home again, home again, jiggity jig. Jarvis, how did I do?”

“Welcome back sir,” Jarvis replied. “You got shot in the back by a forty-year-old shut-in. I think we can almost qualify that as a fail.”

“Thanks, buddy,” Alvin chuckled. “I think I really need to up my Personability. It’s harder than it should be to convince people that I’ve

already helped to see things my way."

"That does indeed come down to your Personability stat. You have a deal in place with them, though. You need to check your XP to see if you even have enough to uphold that deal. Reneging would reflect badly on you."

Alvin pulled up the summary for his first day in World Mode.

World Mode Summary
Total Experience Earned: 2,075 XP
Breakdown: 1 day in World 2,000 XP, Walkers killed 75 XP, Humans killed -100 XP, Stockpile loot 100 XP

"Damn it, not enough," Alvin sighed.

Jarvis coughed, "You are mistaken."

"No, it would cost another hundred and seventy-five for doing all three guns."

"That is correct," Jarvis replied. "You still had two hundred and ten left when you went into World Mode."

Alvin pulled up his total and laughed as he saw the total of 2,285 XP. "Oops. Well spotted, Jarvis."

"I aim to please," came the sarcastic reply.

Alvin upgraded all three guns with the upgrades for better durability and unlimited ammo. "How do I stay in World Mode to sleep, if I want to stay there?"

"When you lay down, there is a small icon for normal sleep mode in the upper right of your visual field. Tap it, and for ten hours you will not be teleported back here when you lie down, unless you toggle it again."

"Good to know," Alvin replied as he got up to pace the room for a second. "Jarvis?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Thanks again, sorry I won't be home much."

"Quite all right, sir. It just means I get more time to mock you in private." Jarvis's dry tone and precise delivery made it hard to tell whether he was serious or not.

"Asshole," Alvin laughed. He opened the job board, his finger hovering over the World Mode button. "I'll be back," he intoned in a bad accent just as he pushed the button.

When the light cleared, he found himself on the bed just as he had been when he left. He got up and wandered out to the front room where Susan and Bill were talking in quiet tones. He slowed to listen in on what they were saying, careful to keep silent.

"I don't know if we're going nuts either, but he has been upfront with us. He stopped to help us when we were in the hospital. I want to trust him, but something keeps making me twinge as if I shouldn't every time he speaks."

"I know," Bill replied. "If he does what he promises though, we should give him a little more rope. If he hangs himself with it, that isn't our fault. It will be entirely up to him to keep showing us he's honest. He'll have to take responsibility for those he brings inside the fence, too."

"I will," Alvin said, stepping around the corner of the hall. "I also thank you for your trust. I just got back, here are your guns. I'm going to actually go hit the hay for a few hours now." He pulled the guns from his backpack, laying them on the coffee table. His lips quirked up, as he watched the surprised looks on their faces that the shotgun and tommy gun had fit into his fanny pack. "Same as before, just unload the magazine then reload for it to refill the ammo. It will refill any magazine you put in it,

meaning you can also stock pile free ammo this way. However, there is a downside that I found out about. Your guns will degrade much faster than you're used to. After a little over a thousand magazines have been fired through the gun it will break now. Sorry that I didn't have that information to give to you sooner."

Bill stood up, meeting Alvin's gaze evenly, "I'll hold to my word. You have to take responsibility for those you invite inside. If you do seventeen more guns for us, I will waive that and give you equal run of the compound."

A pop-up appeared before Alvin's eyes, as he read it a slow smile spread across his face.

Mission: Unlock Wild Bill's Holdout
Task one: Meet minimum number of settlers (3/10 settlers)
Task two: Complete agreement with Wild Bill. (3/20 guns upgraded)

Settlement Draftsman's table has been placed, not usable until the Settlement is fully unlocked.

"Heh," Alvin chuckled. "You going out to test your guns?"

Susan grabbed her shotgun, "That was my plan."

"I'll step out too, briefly. There should be something new in the yard."

Bill eyed him before he grabbed the Tommy and the ivory handled 1911. "Let's go see."

When they exited the house, right next to the door was a metal draftsman's table. Alvin touched the table and a 3D image of the land appeared above the table, along with a multitude of tabs. He briefly touched a few, to find walls, premade structures, furniture and defenses listed as either assets or options. "Looks like I can build and upgrade some things,

but a lot of them are locked out. You and Susan are listed under the settler tab. I don't have any access to do anything with that tab yet."

Bill frowned and as Alvin stepped back from the table he stepped forward and touched it. He frowned, "It doesn't do anything for me."

Susan stepped past Bill and touched the table, "Me, either."

"Must be tied to me trying to start the Settlement then," Alvin opined.

Bill shook his head, "Let's go try out the guns."

Alvin followed them over to the small range. Both of them plugged ear protection in before they stepped up to the firing line. Alvin plugged his ears with his fingers. For the next couple of minutes, they ran a few magazines through each of the guns before they stepped back and removed the earplugs.

"You upheld your end of the bargain," Bill said as he held out his hand. "You promise to do right by us?"

"Yes, sir," Alvin replied, getting his hand crushed again.

"I look forward to you working on more of our guns, then. I'll set aside the ones I want you to do. Tomorrow I'll get them stuck in your room, so you can grab them as you want."

"Thank you, both of you. It's so much nicer dealing with people who don't want to blow your head off and steal your truck."

"Who tried that?" Bill asked as they walked back towards the house.

"Patrick Walker," Alvin replied.

"He tried what?" Susan asked in a heated voice.

“I stopped to pick him up, since he said he needed a ride over the CB. When I got there, some of the stuff in the truck needed to be moved so he could fit in. I was watching the zombies coming up the road when I heard him cock the shotgun he had. I dove forward, got grazed on the back of the head by some of the shot. My hat saved me there. I rolled over and emptied the mag into him. Then got up and put one final one through his head.”

“Fucking useless punk,” Bill grunted. “He mooched off his mother for years. I just pray she went peacefully. She was a good, kind-hearted woman.”

“Well, I’m going back into Green River tomorrow to see if anything can be salvaged, or anyone saved,” Alvin told them as they walked down the ramp. “Anyone I should know to stay away from?”

“I’ll make you a list,” Bill replied. “You take a shower and get some sleep. You’ll need it if you’re going into Green River in the morning.”

Alvin took his advice, enjoying the shower in spite of the water being cool. He slid into the bed, reveling briefly in how soft and comfortable it was as he tapped the sleep icon to make sure he stayed in the game, then fell asleep.

Chapter Twelve

Alvin woke to the warm softness of a comfortable bed and a good blanket. He lay there for a few more minutes, debating going back to sleep before he finally got up out of bed. He got his stuff together, making sure everything was in order before he left the room. He opened the bathroom door to use the john, only to find a nearly naked Susan standing there in just her panties, her bra dangling in one hand as she stared at him in surprise. Alvin froze for a second, his brain shutting off even as his eyes reported that Susan had a very nice figure with her large breasts and nicely flared hips. His mind kicked back on a second later and he slammed the door shut, “Fuck, sorry.”

He cleared his throat, trying to get his mind off the after image. Hard, fast footsteps approaching made him turn his head, just in time to see Bill lower his shoulder, a fraction of a second before he was slammed into the wall by the angry father. “What did you think you were doing?” Bill said as the duo tumbled to the ground, Bill putting Alvin into an arm bar as they fell.

The door to the bathroom cracked open far enough for Susan to stick her head out. “Stop it! It was my fault for not locking the door. He even apologized, Dad. Now let him go and get some water ready so I can whip up breakfast.” She shut the door firmly without waiting for a reply from either man.

Bill grunting, giving Alvin’s arm a small tug before he let go and got to his feet, “I’ll say it again, leave my daughter alone.” Bill stomped off, leaving Alvin on the ground massaging his elbow and chest, which had taken the brunt of Bill’s ire.

“Okay, crazy dad, check,” Alvin muttered as he got to his feet. “Good thing I plan to go out and face the undead today, that will be safer.”

“Will it?” Susan asked, having opened the door without him noticing.

Alvin turned around to see her in flannel and jeans that mostly hid the figure she had. He nodded once, “I think I’d rather face a thousand zombies unarmed than your father when he’s pissed.”

A small laugh escaped Susan, “Most sane people would, I think. That was my fault mostly, but you should have knocked as well.”

“True enough,” Alvin admitted with a chagrined expression. “I’m sorry for catching you like I did. It was wrong of me to not think the room might be in use. Can’t say I’m sorry for seeing what I did, though.”

Susan frowned, “You’re just naturally an ass, aren’t you?”

“I hear that a lot,” Alvin admitted, stepping around her into the bathroom. “I blame it on my lack of positive social interactions as a kid. If you will excuse me.” He shut himself into the bathroom and locked the door. He used the john, taking an extra minute or two to splash water on his face. He knew he shouldn’t have made that comment to her, but he’d always had impulse control issues when talking to people. A counselor once told him he didn’t have a brain to mouth filter, which always made him smile to think about.

When he exited the bathroom, Bill was standing in the hall, “Breakfast will be ready in a few minutes. Are you going to join us before you head out?”

“Sounds like a plan to me. No idea how long I’ll be out for.”

Bill led him into the small dining area where Susan was setting out three bowls of cream of wheat. “It’s plain, but should keep you going for a bit,” Susan said, her voice a touch frosty. She sat down and started eating.

“Thank you for the food,” Alvin told her before he dug into his own bowl. It was still better than the sludge he’d eaten for the last few days in

his cell. When he finished he sat there for a moment, thinking about his plan for the day. He was pulled from his reverie by Susan taking his bowl and Bill setting a piece of paper next to him. “Thank you,” he said to Susan as she turned away from the table before he gave his attention to the paper.

“If you meet any of these twenty people don’t bother saving them,” Bill said, pointing at one column. He then touched the other half of the page, “These are good people, they deserve to be saved if you can find any of them. Anyone else is up to you.”

Alvin took the paper, pocketing it, “I’ll be sure to check while I’m in Green River. Unless things go badly, I hope to be able to check a good portion of the town today.”

“I was looking at the table thing outside earlier,” Bill said. “It won’t tell me anything. I think I need some of this XP you talked about. How do I get some?”

“Kill things,” Susan put in from the small sink. “Just like a video game. Oh wait, you were never big on letting me play those.”

“They won’t teach you anything that you’ll…” Bill was cut off as Susan chimed in to finish the obviously frequently heard refrain.

“Use later in life. That’s what you were going to say, right?” Susan sighed. “Well, guess what? It looks like some of those skills might have come in handy after all. I’m sure the lessons in shooting and survival are also going to be useful, so don’t get me wrong Dad. However, right now even a passing knowledge of video games might be helpful.”

Bill looked away from his daughter, his lips tight at being rebuked in front of a guest. “I was thinking I could go with you,” Bill finally spoke up a moment later, addressing Alvin. “Two sets of eyes and more guns would be useful if we’re going to be facing close to a thousand zombies only a few miles from my cabin.”

“I won’t turn you down, but that does mean leaving Susan here all alone.”

“I’ll turn the CB on, if anything happens here I’ll tell you and the same better be true in return,” Susan replied. “I’ll have my shotgun, so I should be fine here. You just make sure he comes back to me.”

“I’ll do my best,” Alvin replied.

“Your best?” Susan asked.

“If it comes down to me or him, no offense, but I will save me, every time.”

Bill gave a snort, “Most people would and damn few would admit it to others. Let me grab my guns and then we can go.” Bill went off into the bunker leaving the two of them alone.

Susan turned to Alvin, “If he doesn’t come back, I won’t be letting you in and I damn well might kill you myself.”

“Fair enough,” Alvin agreed. “I will do my best. I need to go check something outside before we go.”

He took his leave, heading outside the bunker to check the Draftsman’s table. He opened up the display and checked the cost of things. He frowned, all the costs were greyed out so he couldn’t see them. The only information he could get was a pop-up informing him the settlement still needed to reach the minimum population for the table to unlock.

Alvin turned off the display and went back inside, thinking about what he’d learned from the table. He met Susan and Bill in the long passage as they were heading out. Susan handed him the cooler she was carrying. He reversed course and walked with them back outside. “Hmm, we should discuss how to grow the settlement,” he said.

“What do you mean?” Susan asked.

“This Settlement, which is known as Wild Bill’s Holdout, is owned by me, but it is technically his home. He should have some say in how things work. Now, we already entered into an agreement where I will have access to change everything. As such I’ll be able to grow the settlement, but it also means we can run into conflict over what I think is the way to do things and the way Bill wants to do things.”

“This is because of that table?” Bill grunted.

“To an extent, but it’s more because of what’s happening in the world. Everything is different than it used to be for you. Your guns that I haven’t modified will probably be under the same rules as the ones that are modified, which means they’ll break completely after a set number of rounds are run through them. Same goes with clothing that takes damage, it will help protect you from damage for a time then it will just break and become useless.”

“Why does this remind me of something?” Susan muttered.

“There was a popular set of video games similar to what’s going on. Except that was a nuclear war that covered the globe as opposed to God deciding to say fuck you all and take off. The best set of those games came out after this year, though.” Alvin told her as they walked to the rig.

“Nuclear Winter or something like that,” Susan nodded. “It came out four years ago and the sequel came out two years ago. Something about dwellers in bunkers, and the government running crazy experiments in them.”

Alvin glanced at her then nodded, knowing the company that had set up this game probably didn’t want to be sued for copyright infringement so they’d changed things up some. “Close enough,” Alvin said as he put the cooler behind the passenger seat of the truck. “Guess I’ll take shotgun.”

“Works,” Bill agreed as he got into the truck after giving his daughter a hug. “We’ll be home tonight Sues, so keep dinner warm for us.”

“Just come back in one piece,” Susan replied with a tight smile. She opened the gate as Bill fired the truck up. He pulled out of the compound, looking back to see Susan quickly locking back up behind them.

“She is a special person,” Alvin commented.

“She is, and you just keep your hands off her,” Bill replied keeping his eyes focused on the road.

“I am not looking to cause a rift Bill. I need this to work out, it’s the only way I stand a chance of doing anything here. So, with that said, I will not go after your daughter. Just don’t blame me if she comes to me. I know I’m a sexy man and all…”

Bill snorted, “Ugly as sin is what you mean, son. You also don’t talk to people very well and I can’t shake the feeling that there is something wrong with you.”

“There is something wrong with me,” Alvin agreed. “My Personability stat is awful, below average, which is why you feel that way towards me. It costs a fuck ton of XP to raise it though, another reason I want this Settlement to work. I’m hoping I can get bonus XP from it.”

“Personability stat?” Bill asked.

“Yeah, there are several stats in this game. They determine how good you are at things, how much you can do and stuff like that. Focus on the idea of a character sheet, a bio of your height, weight and stuff. See if it will come up for you.”

Bill frowned but let out a surprised sound just a second later. “Huh. This is getting really weird. What does all this mean?” He slowed the truck as he now had a partial obstruction before his eyes.

“Each of those stats affect you as a person, tap each one to get a description of them. You have to spend XP to raise the stats or to get new

Powers. It all comes down to a balancing act of how you manage the XP you get, which is why me spending my XP to upgrade the guns is such a big deal to me.”

Bill stayed silent for the few miles to town as he drove slowly down the dirt road. “This is going to take some getting used to.”

“I don’t doubt that in the least,” Alvin chuckled. “It was a bit of a shock to me, too. Well, we’re here. My plan is to go house to house. Search and pick up anything useful as we go. If we find people, we try to talk to them. Have to be careful, some of them might have snapped. We kill all the zombies we see and if possible, we can clear part of the main street later to make travel towards Denver or Salt Lake easier.”

“Is that why Susan gave me trash bags?”

“She did?” Alvin asked back, a little surprised. “She really is going to be key in helping the Settlement flourish, it seems.”

“She’s always been able to think ahead,” Bill said, bringing the truck to a stop just past the first few houses. “We doing this in tandem?”

“Two man firing team,” Alvin replied as he got out of the truck. He pulled the 1911 and waited for Bill to come around to him. “We’ll walk back to the last house then work back this way. If you see a zombie kill it, just give it a second to say something so we don’t shoot people.”

“What are we looking to take from the houses?” Bill asked as he pocketed a roll of black trash bags.

“Gold and silver items mostly, paper money is trash at this point. Any guns would be a go as well, just use your judgment. Oh, and all the non-perishable food.” Alvin said as they walked back to the first house just as a zombie came out the front door. “Oh, by the way, as soon as we start firing we’ll probably start to pull them in from all over. We should kill this one and then wait to see how many turn up before we start to loot.”

Bill chambered the Tommy gun, “You get this one, then.”

Alvin took a few steps forward before planting his feet and leaning into the shot. He had learned over the last few days how to help mitigate the recoil to a degree. He took a breath then caressed the trigger. The gun kicked and the zombie lost its mind, literally. “One down,” Alvin said, looking back at Bill. Bill was scanning the street, his Tommy gun at the ready. About a minute later the street began to fill as zombies appeared out of various houses. “Light them up. Head shots are the only killing shot, though they can be slowed or damaged in other spots.”

“Night of the Living Dead,” Bill laughed as he aimed at the closest group and fired a burst into them. One head exploded and another zombie staggered as a hole was punched through its chest. “Hmm, been awhile since I used Ol’ Tom. I’ll get the hang of him again in a moment.”

“I’ll watch your back, take your time,” Alvin replied as he waited two steps behind Bill and to the left, ready to provide support if needed.

He wasn’t needed though, as Bill did as he said and soon got the feel for his gun. He was soon mowing down the zombies up to a hundred feet away with ease. After some time, the street was empty except for a couple of zombies that were dragging themselves forward since their legs had been blown off. Alvin chuckled as he stepped forward while Bill was reloading and put a round through each of the crawling zombie’s heads.

“Well that’s street one down,” Alvin said, pausing to listen to the groans coming towards them. “Seems street two is on the way. You good for staying here while I go loot?”

“Do your thing, Tom’s got your back,” Bill said, patting the butt of his gun with a grin. “It is nice to be able to use him without worrying about ammo. The thirty-round box is the best thing, it makes clearing jams easy and still holds a decent amount.”

“I was wondering why it didn’t have a drum,” Alvin replied before he turned to the house. “Yell if you need me.”

Alvin didn't dawdle as he sacked the house, taking jewelry as well as anything that he thought might be worth barter later on, like the unopened bottle of Jack. As he was finishing up and headed for the door he heard gun fire and came out to watch Bill mow down a collection of zombies he had let close to fifty feet.

Bill laughed wildly as all of the zombies flopped dead before him, ejecting and reloading the magazine before he aimed at the next bunch. Alvin felt a small chill travel up his spine at the wild laughter, Bill was surely at least slightly insane. He called out as he came up, "All done with the first house."

"Go ahead and hit the next one, I got this for now," Bill called back before he mowed down another group of three zombies. "Like fish in a barrel. It hardly seems fair."

Alvin shook his head and went off to the next house. When he came back out, Bill was leaning on the truck staring into town with a bored expression on his face. "All done for now?" Alvin asked as he came over.

"Nothing coming closer right now," Bill said with a shrug. "I got all amped up for a bit, but now that I think about it I'm killing my dead neighbors in a way."

"I don't think zombies qualify as neighbors, not even in the middle of the projects."

A snort of laughter came from Bill, "Hmm, not sure about that. Zombies are smarter than some people I've had to deal with in my time. There was this LT back in 'Nam, he was the only one who could get two plus two equals four and a bit. He was a very special kind of stupid, such a shame when he got tagged by the Cong. We could get away with anything when he was in charge of us."

"Well, you can basically get away with anything now as well," Alvin said as he thought about it for a moment. "Society is gone and the

government has more than likely collapsed. It’s not like the police or anyone is going to be out enforcing laws that no longer apply. Not like you can be held accountable for murder, they’re already dead.”

“True enough, but laws are what hold people together, so there will have to be some even if they’re just plain common sense. For instance, at the moment you’re looting. Out here, that’s fine, but inside the walls that would be theft and as such some form of punishment should be required.”

“True enough. Since there aren’t any more zombies coming this way right now, you should grab a bag and go hit a house so we can get through this faster.”

Bill nodded as he took a bag off the roll and walked after Alvin, “I’ll take house number three.”

For the next half hour, they looted the houses along the street, then moved over to the next street and started in on that one. No zombies showed up on the second street, but one of the houses was locked. Alvin knocked heavily on the door and called out, waiting to see if an answer was forthcoming. After a moment of nothing, he could hear movement inside the front door. Alvin stepped back, placing his hand on his pistol just in case. The door rattled a second later as something hit it from the inside.

“Bill, I got at least one zombie over here,” Alvin called out to the vet. “Keep an eye out for a second, please.” Bill gave him a nod, so Alvin pulled the gun and fired a shot through the door at his head height. He waited to see if the zombie was still moving and the door rattled again. Alvin walked the bullets down the door from a foot above his head, down six inches at a time until he emptied the clip. He reloaded and waited, but no more sounds came from inside.

Alvin looked at the locked door and pulled a set of small screwdrivers from a pocket, using them to pick the lock. The door swung open about a foot before it stopped. Alvin looked in around the door to see a little old lady with her brains blown out blocking the door from opening further.

He leaned on the door to push it open further. Almost immediately he stumbled back with a curse as a one-year old came toddling at him. “Fuck,” he yelled as he fell backward down the single step and landed hard on his ass.

Bill jerked the gun up, looking for the zombie. He frowned when nothing came through the door. “What is it?”

Alvin backed up another foot as he pulled his pistol, aiming for the mostly open door and waited. A few seconds ticked by before the zombie crawled out of the house. Alvin put three rounds into the small zombie in rapid succession. “Baby zombie,” Alvin replied as he holstered the gun again. “Scared the fuck out of me.” He glanced back to see Bill had gone pale, staring at what remained of the dead child with glassy eyes. “Bill?”

Bill’s eyes drifted from the dead baby to Alvin and he swallowed hard, “Not something I thought I’d have to see again.”

Alvin got back to his feet, “You going to be okay?”

“I’ll just stay out here for a few minutes,” Bill replied, his gaze distant as he looked away from the bodies.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” Alvin said, collecting his tools and going into the house.

He didn’t find much he thought would be of value except for an older rifle in a carry bag. He briefly wished he could identify items outside of his room. He stuck the rifle into his backpack, knowing he would need to get it identified. He exited the house to find Bill hunched in a sitting position on the ground, the Tommy gun resting across his knees.

“Bill, you okay?”

Bill looked up, his face still pale, “I’ll be fine in a bit. Just dealing with some memories.”

Alvin looked around to make sure they hadn't attracted more zombies. "Okay. I'll get along with the job. Just make sure you don't get eaten by zombies, I don't want to explain that to Susan."

Bill nodded once, but didn't move otherwise. Alvin wondered if Bill was going to be okay, but he went on to the next house leaving the vet alone. After Alvin finished the houses on the small street he came back to the truck and put the loot away. "You good to go?"

Bill climbed to his feet wordlessly and got in on the passenger side. Alvin considered going back to the bunker, but opted against it. He got the truck running and moved closer to the heart of the small town. Alvin turned onto the next street to find a two-car accident taking up the middle of the road. He could either run over a mail box, or try to push one of the vehicles out of the way. The mailbox made a satisfying crunch as the truck ran it over.

He parked in the middle of the road and got out, looking around warily for any signs of movement. Bill climbed out a minute later, his gaze still distant until a gunshot rang out from the far end of the street. The Tommy gun came up smoothly and Bill's expression went from dazed to sharp in a fraction of a second. Alvin spun towards the sound, his hand going to his pistol as he watched an ambulance smash into a parked car and come to a halt. Both men ran towards the vehicle, guns up and ready to shoot as they closed the few hundred feet to the wreck.

Chapter Thirteen

The back of the ambulance opened to disgorge a bald man with a pistol aiming back the way the ambulance had come. The man fired another seven shots before the gun ran dry. He dropped the gun and reached back for something in the ambulance. As Bill and Alvin were closing the distance, most of their view was obscured by a six-foot wood fence but Alvin could make out the sound of many feet and lots of groaning. They'd covered half the distance as the man pulled a fire axe from the back before he slammed the door shut.

"Stay inside," the man yelled as he turned back towards the oncoming zombies.

"Fire through the fence," Alvin told Bill as he went around Bill to clear the line of fire.

Bill slid to a stop a hundred feet short and went full auto as he emptied the clip. Alvin blinked, surprised that the Tommy gun had been modified to be a full auto weapon. Alvin closed the distance to thirty feet to the ambulance, which was stopped dead. He could hear someone trying to crank the engine. He got a look on the other side of the fence thanks to his angle and he hesitated as he saw at least two hundred zombies coming his way.

Alvin stopped where he was and pulled his gun up, opening fire. As he and Bill put shot after shot into the mass of zombies, the man who had gotten out of the ambulance was swinging the axe for all he was worth to kill the ones close to him. Alvin didn't risk a shot into the melee and Bill was busy reloading and emptying mags through the fence, which was rapidly disintegrating under the sheer volume of fire.

Alvin was starting to feel good about their chances when the axe wielder screamed and was pulled down by five zombies that all got to him

at the same time. Knowing that guy was done, Alvin reloaded his next clip and fired into the scrum. His clip killed three of the five, then his next clip killed the last two, plus he ventilated the head of the guy who had been protecting the ambulance. Alvin went back to focusing on the zombies, mowing them down as fast as he could. Several minutes later they finally ran out of zombies to kill.

Bill let his arms droop as he walked to Alvin and the two of them walked to the ambulance side by side. The back door opened, revealing a brunette nurse who cautiously got out to check on the dead man. She knew at a glance that the man was dead, thanks to the bullet wound to his head. She looked at the mass of dead zombies, then looked over at Alvin and Bill as they walked toward her.

“We don’t want any trouble,” her voice broke as she held up her hands in a non-threatening manner.

“We just want to help,” Bill told her.

“You shot Leon,” another feminine voice said from inside the ambulance, before she poked her head out the door.

Alvin realized who they were as he got a good look at both of them. “He was dead and I wasn’t about to let him get back up. Is the doctor still with you?”

Both nurses paused as they looked at him for a long moment before their eyes got big. “It’s you,” one of them said with a touch of fear to her voice.

Giving them a cold smile, Alvin shrugged, “Didn’t realize it was you guys until I saw you just a second ago.” He heard the driver’s door open followed by footsteps as the person came around the ambulance.

The doctor appeared much as he had at the hospital where Alvin had saved Bill. “Are you going to kill the rest of us now as well?”

Alvin looked at Bill, “Three nurses and a doctor from the hospital you were at. I saved them after you left. The dead guy was an orderly who threatened to bash my head in by way of thanks. It’s your choice if you want to offer them sanctuary. I’ll be in the nearest house.” Alvin turned away and walked towards the nearest house, kicking open the door in frustration as he went inside. By the time he came out, the nurses, the doctor, and Bill were all moving boxes from the ambulance to the truck.

Alvin walked over with his trash bag, putting it with the boxes before he got out of their way. “Are they are coming with?” Alvin asked Bill.

“They said they’re willing to stay at least a night or two,” Bill replied. “Have you found any camping gear in any of the houses?”

“One of the first houses we looted had a tent and two sleeping bags. I left them there, though. We can go back and grab them.”

“After we load up this medicine we’ll head back to the cabin,” Bill replied. “Get unloaded, have some lunch, then come back again.”

“Sounds good,” Alvin said as he glanced down the street. “I’ll help with loading, but they are for you.” Alvin pointed down the road where another crowd of zombies was headed their way.

Bill picked the Tommy gun off the seat and walked over to the ambulance to stand behind it. He leveled the gun and began to put more rounds downrange at the approaching horde. The nurses began to panic as they saw the approaching horde, as did the doctor. Alvin just calmly grabbed the next box and began to walk back to the truck.

“We need to go,” one of the nurses said as he got back to the truck. “He said you have the keys. We should go while he holds them off.”

Alvin shook his head as he put the box into the little space left in the sleeper. “Nope, not leaving Bill. If I did, his daughter would kill us all when

we got back to their place. That’s not an exaggeration. So just help grab the last few boxes, then we can go.”

The doctor got in his way as Alvin turned to go back for another box. “Look, we are leaving. Give me the keys,” the doctor demanded, holding out his hand.

Alvin gave the doctor a blank look for a second before he snorted, stepping around the man, “If you want to run that badly, start walking. Should be pretty clear back that way.” Alvin jerked a thumb over his shoulder toward the streets he and Bill had already cleared.

Alvin was yanked to a stop as the doctor grabbed his shoulder and spun him around. Alvin winced as the doctor’s fist hit him square in the face, then he blinked as he realized he didn’t actually feel any pain. The doctor, though, was holding his arm and grimacing as if he had hit a wall. “That looks like it hurt. If you try attacking me again, I will just kill you,” Alvin stated plainly and went back to the ambulance for another box.

The three nurses all gathered around the doctor, who was grimacing as he held his hand. One of them started wrapping the damaged wrist while another gave the doctor a few pills along with some water from the cooler that had been in the truck. All three of them looked at Alvin warily as he went past them carrying another box. “Asshole,” one of them muttered as the other two made affirmative noises.

Alvin turned to see Bill carrying the last box towards them. “All done?”

“Yeah. What happened to the doctor?” Bill asked as he slid the last box into the back of the truck.

The doctor interrupted Alvin’s reply, “He sprained my wrist. You should consider carefully who you offer your help to. This man has shown multiple times that he will kill without compunction.”

Alvin snorted, “He punched me in the face. Hah, the armor of my cap was enough to absorb the strike. I didn’t feel a thing.”

Bill looked at Alvin for a moment before he turned to the doctor, “You don’t get it, do you? This man saved me and my daughter from the same hospital you came from. He has proven to me that he can be trusted to guard my back. You, on the other hand, haven’t proven shit to me yet, and looks like you damaged your own wrist.” He paused to look at the group, “We can carry the nurses in front, but it means sitting on laps. Doc, you can sit in the back. Don’t worry, we won’t be going fast.”

“This is bullshit,” the doctor spat. “I am a doctor, imminently more valuable than that hoodlum.”

Bill turned to face the doctor, his face going hard, “Sit in the back to come with, or stay here. Those are your only choices at this time. If you threaten harm to anyone who is part of my community, I will bury you myself.”

The doctor took a step back and the nurses all huddled together, “This is insane.”

Bill opened the passenger door, asking as he did, “Ladies, are you coming to safety or staying here with him?”

Alvin climbed into the driver’s seat, getting the truck started as he waited. The blonde nurse stepped forward, then darted for the cab and climbed in quickly, sitting in the middle of the bench seat. The second nurse, a redhead, came forward and sat on the blonde’s lap. Bill climbed in next and held out his hand to the last nurse. The last nurse, a mousy looking brunette, looked back at the doctor before she stepped forward. Bill helped her get in and settled onto his lap.

Shutting the door, Bill looked out the window at the speechless doctor, “You have ten seconds, then we are leaving.”

Alvin revved the engine as he silently counted to ten then put the truck into gear. He saw the doctor scramble for the back of the truck as he started to roll forward. Alvin kept the truck to about fifteen miles per hour as they crawled back to the bunker, not wanting to go any faster and risk shifting stuff and maybe losing some of it. They paused at the one house so Alvin could go in to get the tent and sleeping bags. He smiled cheerfully at the doctor, who glared back at him as he went by both ways. When they were within a mile of the bunker, Bill grabbed the CB and told his daughter to come open up the gate.

Alvin let the truck idle by the gate for a few minutes while Susan came out and opened them. He parked next to the door to the bunker, jumping out of the truck as soon as he had it stopped. The nurses climbed out with Susan’s help. The doctor was giving everyone the stink eye as they all started to unload the truck. Susan struck up a conversation with the nurses as they brought all the supplies into the bunker. The doctor pleaded that the injury to his wrist meant he was unable to carry anything.

Bill handed the doctor the tent, “Set this up over there.” Bill pointed to the other side of the bunker from the firing range. “That’s going to be your home for a while, so you might want to make sure you do it right.”

The doctor just blinked at Bill with a stunned expression as Bill put the tent in his hands and walked away. Alvin held back his laughter as he carried another box into the bunker. Once they had the truck emptied of things, he found Susan and the nurses all cataloging and separating the stuff to some arcane formula that only she knew. Bill waved Alvin over from the kitchen where he had a couple of sandwiches, along with a pitcher of lemonade.

Alvin took a seat and gratefully took a bite of peanut butter and jelly, the orange marmalade going okay with the lemonade. The two men ate in silence until they were done, then Bill leaned back. “I haven’t shot that much, in a single day, in donkey’s years. I’m going to ache like hell tomorrow.”

“I don’t think my body would have survived all the rounds you put through that monster,” Alvin replied.

“It’s not the best weapon, but I have a bit of history with it. It used to belong to my father, who brought it with him back from the war. So technically you could call it stolen US military property.” Bill grinned as he leaned back in his chair, “He loved that thing, said it saved his life half a dozen times.”

“It can be upgraded another four times,” Alvin said a moment later. “I can see why it would be considered rare, now that I know its history.”

“What can it be upgraded with?” Bill asked, sitting forward suddenly intensely interested. Alvin listed the upgrades he could remember and Bill sat back again, “Hmm, that could be some tough choices there. I would love to have it made even more durable, but the cost for that is pretty high. Maybe both of the recoil upgrades as well. I wonder about the silver and holy ammo types, though. Something tells me it will be important at some point.”

“I just hope it’ll be a while,” Alvin replied, then he remembered the rifle and pulled it out of his backpack. “Take a look at this and tell me what I’m seeing, please.”

Bill took the rifle and examined it, “M14, scoped which means it was meant for someone to use as a marksman.”

“Well, guess I’ll have to take it back to my cell tonight to see if its anything special or not.”

“We should head back out and see if we can scrounge anything else today,” Bill said, getting to his feet just as the women came into the room. He nodded to them, “Ladies, I hope Susie is showing you everything. We have enough room for you to bunk out in a room together.”

“What about Rahim?” one of them asked.

“That the doc?” Bill asked, getting a nod in reply. “He’ll be using the tent to sleep outside.”

“What if the zombies get in?” the mousey brunette asked in a scared voice.

“We’re five miles from town so it’s unlikely, at least in the short term, that they’ll get here. Besides, we,” he pointed to Alvin and himself, “are going back out there to see if anything else can be done. I still hope to find a few people. At the moment, the only thing you should be worried about is yourself. If the doc can get his head out of his ass, we should get along fine. If he keeps on like he has, he will be asked to leave. Any of you can leave at any time, but we won’t be giving you much in the way of supplies if you go.”

“What about him?” the blonde nurse asked pointing at Alvin, with her lips turning down.

“Al here has been welcomed into my home. He is very rough and he isn’t pleasant, but he is dependable. I suggest you give him a fair shake, he did save me and my daughter from the hospital. I hear he also made your escape easier as well. So maybe you should give him a chance.” Bill finished, speaking catching their eyes one at a time before he turned and walked off. “Let’s go, Al.”

Alvin caught up to him a few feet down the hall, “Any of them catch your eye?”

Bill shook his head, “The blonde isn’t bad, but until they prove they can handle what life is now, I won’t touch them. I have no need for a useless woman.”

The doctor was still trying to get the tent up as Alvin started the truck. The sudden noise caused the doctor to fall over and the partially erected tent to collapse. Alvin grinned as the doctor glared at him, “See you later, Rahim.” Alvin drove over to the gate which Bill had opened. Once

Bill had the gate shut behind them and gotten into the truck, they started back to Green River again.

As they drove back Bill glanced over at Alvin, “So, which one did you prefer?”

“I’m partial to redheads, but then, what man doesn’t like a redhead? Considering that all three actively dislike me currently, though, not even going to try. Maybe once my Personability gets up to the average of three I’ll try. Really need to do that, pretty sure it’s one of the main reasons behind people reacting so negatively to me. For instance, you leveled a gun at me and were ready to shoot when we met just down the road here. If I had a four or more in Personability, I’m sure it would have been bro-hugs and high-fives.”

“Bro-hugs?” Bill said with disdain, “I’d rather shoot myself.”

Laughing, Alvin shook his head, “High-fives it is, then.”

When they got back to the town they were just a few streets away from the center of town. They went back to work looting houses and killing the odd zombie here or there. One street away from the center of town they came across a number of bodies lying in the road and a pile of them near one home. Bill grinned, “That’s Frank’s house, he might still be alive. I’m going to go check, while you do the houses on either side.”

“Stay safe. He might not be real easy to talk to, depending on how he’s dealing with the world turning into zombies.”

Shaking his head, Bill got out, “He was always a ‘watch the world burn’ kind of guy.”

Alvin headed for the first home he was going to loot as Bill went the other way. Bill approached the home with caution, but no shots rang out as he approached. Once he was at the door, he knocked revelry on the door, with light taps. Looking up, Bill saw the curtains behind the iron bars on

one window twitch slightly and he grinned at them. The door jerked open a minute later, “Bill? You’re alive? How is Susan?”

Bill shook hands with Frank, “She’s holding the cabin down. How are things here?”

Frank’s smile vanished, his face going blank, “The wife turned. I had to put her down.” His eyes were dry as his lips firmed up, “I’ve held them off, but I was beginning to wonder if I should.”

The smile had vanished from Bill’s face as well, “She was a good woman. It’s a damn shame she’s gone. You know as well as I do, though, that she would be cussing a blue streak if she heard you say that. We have room for you at the cabin, you should come with us. Your jeep should run, all the older cars seem to be okay. The newer shit doesn’t even turn over, though.”

Frank met Bill’s eyes, “I’ll come for now. It’ll be nice to see Susie again for a bit. Anything I should bring with?”

Nodding, Bill replied, “Everything that’s worth a damn. My new ally will be done looting the Vanderlit’s place in a minute then we can just load up your stuff and head back.”

“You’re looting the houses?” Frank seemed mildly shocked.

“They ain’t using them anymore, and the few things we’re taking are worth the time and effort. For instance, the canned food. That will really help out. We already got a few nurses up at the cabin, along with an asshole doc who might be leaving us one way or another.”

“I don’t think looting is the way to go, but I won’t gainsay you if you’re trying to put together a holdout. I’ll start getting things ready to go,” Frank said, leaving the door open as he went back inside the house.

Bill watched the older vet go with sad eyes, knowing the loss of Rachel must weigh on him. He turned to see Alvin coming out of the first

house and flagged him over. Alvin dropped off the bag at the truck before coming over.

"What's up?"

"Frank is alive, he had to put his wife down, though. He'll be coming with but we'll need to help pack everything. Then he'll make the trip to the cabin."

Alvin grimaced, "This is taking longer than I had hoped it would." He scratched his chin for a moment, the beginnings of a beard prickling his fingers, "How about you leave me the Tommy, and I'll just stockpile the loot next to houses while you make the trip up and back?"

"Not the best idea, but if you think you can hold out on your own I'll do it," Bill said as Frank came to the door, frowning at Alvin.

"This the guy?" Frank asked bluntly, his frown not wavering.

"Low Personability," Alvin sighed. "I am, I'm sorry to hear about your wife. I'm going to see about clearing more of the zombies out while you and Bill do what you need to here."

His eyes sized Alvin up, before Frank spoke again, "I peg you as trouble, boy. Petty, probably a mean streak, and you've killed a man for sure. Can I trust you around my friends?"

"I killed an abuser as a kid, then another few who've tried to attack me since this shit started. I do have a mean streak and I won't argue the petty, but I won't turn on allies." He deliberately left off that he hadn't had many of those.

Frank snorted, "Actions speak, boy, not words. Bill is vouching for you, so don't you go proving him wrong."

"I won't," Alvin replied as he took the gun Bill offered, walking towards the next house. As he went he heard Frank talking to Bill.

“He have a death wish, to go hunting these things with just a 1911 and a Tommy with one clip?”

“Well, Frank, the thing is, the world itself is different now. I’ll explain while we load and I’ll prove it back at the cabin.”

Chapter Fourteen

By the time Bill got back, Alvin had looted the rest of the houses on that street and started on the next one. He could see Main street from where he was, along with movement in the distance in the heart of town. Alvin waved to Bill, puzzled by the fact he wasn't alone, he had Frank and the blonde nurse with him.

"What's up?" Alvin asked as he shifted his shoulders, getting used to the leather jacket he'd found.

"Frank and Betty are going to play pick-up and delivery service while I guard and you loot." Bill replied as he took back the Tommy gun, "That should help speed things up."

Frank and Betty got out of the truck and started loading the pile of loot into the back of the pick-up. "We'll get this stuff then go back and get the last street. After we go drop that off, we'll come back and see where you've gotten off too." Frank told him as he took the current bag from Alvin.

"Works, maybe we'll get this section done by the end of the day now," Alvin said with a smile at Frank and Betty. "Thanks."

"I just want to prove I can be useful," Betty said as she went to the closest house and struggled to pick up the bag there.

Alvin smirked but held back the laugh he felt as he watched her crab walk the bag to the truck. "Okay, Bill," he said as he turned to Bill, "ready to go wreak havoc in the middle of town?"

Bill checked his gun before he nodded, "Sure thing." The two of them started towards the main street side by side. "Jacket looks a little big."

“It is, I’m hoping I can get it adjusted when I pop back to my cell tonight. This should provide me with some armor, unlike my shirt.”

“Guess I should drag out my old gear then, as well,” Bill commented as they reached the corner of the road. “This is going to be a hassle,” he added as he looked at the massive pile up in town.

“Eventually we’ll want to clear the road,” Alvin sighed. “I was thinking of trying to find a trailer for the truck, too. It would make this much easier with all that storage space. If we can clean out the town, then we can get everyone to help pitch in with the looting.”

“Except for Susan, she’ll stay at the cabin. I don’t trust the doc, he was shifty-eyed when I got back with Frank. Might have to take him for a walk and explain things again.”

“Best remember the nurses dote on him. We want at least one of them to stay around for basic aid. Maybe the doc will wise up and get his head together after tonight. I mean, it has only been a day since the event.”

Bill grunted, “Yeah, not many people are known for fast adapting.”

They started down the last stretch of road towards town. The sound of an engine drawing closer made them both stop. Looking west, they made out a car heading down Main Street from the exit off I-70.

“He’ll have to turn onto this street either north or south,” Alvin commented. “The beginning of the wrecks starts just past the corner up there.”

They walked a bit further down the street, watching the car as it slowed at the corner then turned towards them. Alvin stepped off to the right as Bill went to the left.

Alvin raised his hand up, trying to get the car to pause as it came towards them at a slow pace, the driver obviously watching them carefully. As the car came closer it slowed as the driver’s window lowered.

Alvin met the unsmiling face of a young man. “Afternoon, officer,” he said, noting the police uniform the man wore.

The young man grimaced and looked at his passenger for a moment, before he sighed. “It can’t be the same guy, Gran.”

Alvin ducked his head down to look into the car, to see Terry Giardino in the passenger seat. “Grandma Terry, it is a pleasure to see you again. This must be James, then, that you told me so much about when we got you out of the trailer park.”

Terry eyed him before she nodded, “I thought it was you.”

“That isn’t possible,” James said again. “We left there immediately and he wasn’t even in a vehicle.”

“That is true, James,” Alvin admitted, “however, I did beat you here. Where are you two going?”

“Somewhere…” James cut off as Bill walked to the bumper and began to lay down fire back the way the car had come from. James looked in the rearview to see a pack of zombies shuffling down the street. “What the fuck is he doing?”

“Killing the undead,” Alvin replied. “We have a small community forming just outside of town. You being a man who can handle firearms, would make you a valuable member of the community, if you want a safe place to stay. Gran is welcome as well, I know she can keep her shit together.”

“Better than many of the others that we’ve seen,” Terry agreed.

“We have a couple of others loading up our loot, just down there. If you want to follow them, they can lead you back to the cabin. It has a good wall and we’re armed there with enough fire power to hold the zombies

off.” Alvin said, raising his voice to be heard as Bill emptied another clip in the Tommy.

“He can’t have enough rounds,” James murmured as he shifted the mirror to watch Bill.

“We have a trick for that that we don’t mind sharing with fellow community members,” Alvin grinned as Bill reloaded the empty clip and began to fire again.

James’s face was dumbfounded as he watched the same action, “How is he…”

“Look, we’re a bit busy right now,” Alvin replied. “Just follow Frank and Betty back to the compound. Once we’re done here we can answer your questions, okay?”

“James,” Terry said jabbing him in the side. “We are going to do as the man suggests.”

“Gran, that isn’t…”

“We are doing as I said, young man,” Terry said firmly.

James sighed then looked away from his grandmother, turning back to Alvin, “Follow the truck down there?”

“Yup. See you all later. James, if you want to help out once Terry is safe, just catch a ride back with Frank.” Alvin said as he stepped back from the window, giving Terry a friendly nod, “Good to see you again, Terry.”

James shook his head as he pulled away, going towards Frank and Betty who had kept looking over at the car. As James went he rolled the window back up.

Bill paused to reload and glance back at Alvin, “So?”

“He’s going to follow Frank back up. I rescued the old woman earlier, like I did you. She has a story from her childhood that you have to hear to believe.”

“We good to continue then?” Bill asked as he saw another group of zombies turn onto the street.

“Yup. Let’s open the doors as we go so any zombies inside will come out. We can get some of the others to do the actual looting while we just go kill shit.”

“Works for me,” Bill said as he began to fire again.

Alvin and Bill held the street free of zombies for close to an hour, opening unlocked doors as they went. Alvin picked the few locked ones. They didn’t find anyone still alive in any of the houses, though they did find two zombies in one locked house.

They made it to Main Street, with an auto supply store on one side and a fast food place on the other. The massive pile up started on their left and stretched down the street further into town. They could see movement from further into town as well.

“Auto supplies could be useful, at least for anything that could be used on our current vehicles,” Alvin opined.

“Might take a bit to figure out what we’d want, though,” Bill grunted as he stretched, trying to ease some of the muscles that were being punished by the constant firing of the Tommy.

“If the cop comes back, we can always sic him on that job.”

Before Bill could respond they heard the truck coming up behind them and stopping. Turning, they saw Frank, James, Betty and the redheaded nurse getting out of the truck. “Looks like we have more help,” Bill replied. He waved the group over as they walked back a bit towards

them. “Thanks for coming out. The houses are clear, so grab the same things we’ve been grabbing.”

“James, if you can loot the supply store over there,” Alvin added, waving at the auto supply store. “Grab anything that can be used on your car, the truck, and if they have anything for the rig back at the bunker.”

“I don’t feel right about looting people’s things, or robbing a store. But if I have to choose, I’ll take the store,” James’s emotional conflict was easy to read on his face.

“Hate to say this, James, but the law you upheld is gone now. We will be establishing rules and regulations at the Holdout though, and you could be a big help there. Are you with us?” Alvin asked as he watched James.

“Gran says you’re okay, but I have my doubts looking at you. She is insistent that we’ll be staying at least for a time, so for now at least I’m with you.”

“Welcome aboard,” Bill grunted before crushing the cop’s hand. “Mind yourself around my daughter, though.”

James winced as his hand was engulfed by Bill’s mitt, “I’ll keep that in mind, sir.”

“Al and I are going to take a stroll down Main for a bit, then turn back up the next set of streets, which should be mostly clear by now. Frank, you’re the security for the ladies. If you doubt if something is down for good then put a round through its head.” Bill said as he took off his Ivory handled 1911 and held it out to James. “Just reload the empty and go back to firing,” he added as James took the gun with a questioning look. “Frank, I see you have Susan’s shotgun. She tell you about it?”

“She did. I have to say it takes some getting used to the idea. I put it through a test run on the range, so I’m good with it now.”

“What do you mean, about loading the empty and keep firing?” James asked as he looked at the gun.

Alvin fished one of the empty clips he still had on him out of his back pocket. He held it out to James, “Take that, eject the clip in it currently then put that one in.”

James did so slowly as if he expected a trick. His eyes widened as he felt the gun get a touch heavier a split second after the empty was seated. He popped the empty clip to find it fully loaded. “How in the hell?”

“We’ll explain later tonight,” Alvin cut in. “Just know it will keep doing that every time. You have effectively unlimited ammo, and we can see about doing it for your own firearms later tonight.”

James blinked at the 1911 before he got the holster onto his duty belt next to his Glock. “I think this is going to take some explaining.”

“Okay, Bill, let’s go take that stroll. You all have fun and make sure we grab all we can,” Alvin said over his shoulder as he and Bill began to walk back to Main.

Alvin used his tools to hotwire those cars he could and move them out of the street. It didn’t clear up the mess, but it helped thin things down a little.

“If we can make a path through this clusterfuck, I could drive them up the road towards your place,” Alvin said as he got out of a Cutlass.

“Need to find a winch to pull the rest of this mess off to the side one at a time,” Bill grunted. “Or it will take all of us pushing them in neutral.”

“Tomorrow or the day after, but yeah, I think clearing the road is still a really good idea.”

“Company,” Bill said as he raised the Tommy. “I’m not sure I’ll be able to do this again tomorrow.”

“We’ll see what we can do,” Alvin replied as he thought of getting a medkit for Bill tonight, to help with the damage that he was doing to his shoulder.

The trip up the next side street was anticlimactic after all the zombie killing they’d done on Main. Alvin got the locked houses open, which resulted in another round of zombie deaths. He handled the zombie kids out of Bill’s view. They had cleared several blocks going north by the time the sun was starting to sink. They walked back to a cross street just as Frank and crew turned onto the street with the truck.

“We’re done killing for the night,” Alvin said, Bill nodding along with his words. “We’ll help you guys loot this stretch then it’s back to the Holdout for the night.”

While looting the guys heard the nurses scream and ran for the house the women were in. Both nurses inside were screaming in horror. As they got to the house, Alvin realized why. He stopped in the doorway, holding out a hand to stop the other men, “Bill, stop.”

Bill skidded to a halt, his gun half raised, “Get out of the way, they need help.”

“There are no zombies in there, just a few bodies that you don’t want to see,” Alvin replied. “I’ll go help them and James can come with, but you stay out here, Bill.” With that Alvin went into the house.

Bill frowned but took up position by the door as Frank finally came running up, having been the furthest away. “They have it,” Bill said gruffly as he looked away, ashamed of his own weakness.

“What was it?” Frank asked as he stopped next to his friend.

“Kids,” Bill said, his voice trembling for a moment. “They can become zombies as well.”

Frank blanched, “Shit.”

James came out with the two nurses, all of them grey faced. Alvin came out ten minutes later with the bag of loot. “This house is done.”

“Little cold aren’t you?” Frank asked in a hard voice.

Alvin met Frank’s eyes with his own emotionless ones, “I don’t like the idea of killing zombie kids, but I will if others can’t or won’t.”

Frank’s jaw clenched for a moment before he turned to walk back to the truck, “I don’t like it.”

Bill stood there for a moment, “What did you do with the bodies?”

“Put them in the bathroom and covered them in oil. I’ll light the house after we’re ready to go.”

“We’re done, the others can’t finish tonight after that.”

Sighing, Alvin nodded as he handed the bag to Bill, “This might cost us more of the town if it spreads, but I’ll be back.”

A few minutes later Alvin came walking out of the house as smoke began to pour from an upstairs window. He jumped into the bed of the truck with Bill and James. He met the gaze of the other two with a grimace as the truck began to move.

Chapter Fifteen

When they got back to the compound, the brunette nurse, Susan and the doctor were all waiting for them, asking what happened in town. Alvin looked at them blankly for a minute before he looked over his shoulder at the column of smoke. It was rising straight into the air, as there was no wind to disturb it. He was pretty sure that just the one house would burn, leaving the others intact.

When he finished his quick explanation, Alvin was still showing no emotion. “I know most of you can’t deal with even the concept of what happened. I will shoulder that burden. Why don’t we head inside though, and we can go over what the world is now.”

When they reached the main room, everyone chose spots to sit or stand. Bill looked over the group, “Everyone has seen a demonstration of the guns, which might make this a little easier to deal with. If you would be kind enough to tell them the story, Alvin?”

Alvin went to the middle of the room, aware of everyone’s eyes on him. He looked around, meeting their eyes. Most were curious, a couple of them were more or less hostile. “Let me start at the beginning. I woke up in a small grey room…” He gave them the edited version of what he had been going through. By the time he finished, all of them looked shocked, “Which brings us to now. So, if things go well, we might find a few more people to join us.”

“This is all because of you, then?” Rahim asked with anger in his voice. “We would be having normal lives if not for you?”

Alvin blinked, as he hadn’t considered how it might look that way. “No. Either you wouldn’t exist at all or another person like me would be here. The only fact that matters now is that the world you knew is gone. This world is very different in some ways, very much like a video game. To

prove the point, all you have to do is think about your stats and you should get a pop-up screen, bluish in color, that tells you all about yourself."

A few people gave startled gasps as they caused their screens to appear. After a few minutes, most of them looked a little more unsettled but with a firmer set to their jaws. "How do we change these numbers or gain more things like the gun upgrades that you've been doing?" James asked, his eyes glued to the screen hovering before him.

"Experience, which is gotten through combat, loot acquired, or doing a job for the community. There may be other ways as well, but those are the ones I know for certain. The settlement can be modified through the draftsman table you all saw outside, but only I can access it. I can't do anything to it until we have enough people here and I finish my task for Bill. Don't yet know what I'll be able to do, but I should be able to add rooms to this place at least."

"Why don't the rest of us have equal access?" Rahim demanded.

"Because this is apparently his story," Bill said simply. "Other people might gain access later, we don't know and won't until we check more into it. Right now, we've been more concerned with finding survivors, like Frank and yourselves, and stockpiling as much as we can. For the next few days we will continue to do so, and if Alvin gets any update he will tell me and we'll go from there. For now, you are allowed to stay as long as you help. Don't act up or cause trouble, and you can stay. We'll set up actual rules and laws later, and we even have a cop who's impartial enough to help us abide by them."

James gave a tight smile, "Impartial enough. I will protect my Gran first and foremost."

"Nonsense," Terry said. "We are going to help rebuild part of this world. That comes first, James."

"We can stay, then?" Betty asked.

Susan answered her, “You’ve gone out and helped, you volunteered your aid. So, yes, you can stay. Even the doctor, who’s done nothing but bitch, can stay for now. The problem tonight is we don’t have rooms for you all. I’ll be staying with Dad and Frank in his room. Terry and you three,” Susan nodded to the nurses, “will stay in my room. Alvin, James and the doctor will stay in the last room.” She eyed the doctor, “Don’t make me regret you sleeping inside.” She went back to addressing the group as a whole, “We’ll need to know if you want to be here for the long term or if you want to go out and find another place tomorrow. If you do, we can find you a vehicle. Dad said there are plenty of cars in town that still run. We’ll give you a few days of food and a weapon before you go.”

“We will be given a gun like you have?” Rahim asked.

“Yes,” Alvin interjected. “I’ll use my own XP to make it happen, if Bill will supply a gun. If you don’t want to be here, we would rather you left anyway.”

“We can sleep on it?” asked the mousey brunette nurse who hadn’t gone into town to help.

“Of course. Just tell us by noon tomorrow, so we can arrange things,” Susan replied. “Now that that’s settled, I have soup on the stove staying warm. You can eat in here or at the table. Once we’ve all eaten, we can take turns in the shower. First one done eating gets first shot at it, and so on until we’ve all had a chance. Do not hang back or you will wait until everyone else has had their turn, and remember to lock the door.”

Alvin held back his laughter, causing him to snort as he looked away from Susan, which in turn caused her to turn pink. “Always lock the door,” he added, “and be sure to knock before you try to go in.”

“Time for food,” Bill cut in as he stood up, motioning Susan to the kitchen. He followed her with a glance back at Alvin and a small shake of his head.

As everyone got up and started for the kitchen, James hung back. He slid up next to Alvin, “So are you and her…?”

Alvin chuckled, “Nope. Bill would kill me, and I’m fairly attached to my own life. Not that I’d object if she threw herself at me, not at all with the way she looks.” His lips quirked up as the image of Susan in the bathroom that morning came back to him.

“Ah. Okay, then,” James said as he went towards the kitchen, leaving Alvin alone in the main room.

Dinner went by quickly for most, everyone eager to get cleaned up. Alvin got his food last and ate slowly. As he did he watched the others, trying to pick up on if they would stay or not. He noticed the nameless brunette nurse and Rahim talking a lot in whispers. When Rahim went for his shower, the brunette spoke at length with the two other nurses. James talked to both Frank and Bill, asking them both various questions about their military history. James’s father had been rejected for service during Vietnam. Terry and Susan conversed quietly in one corner, occasional bursts of quiet laughter punctuating their conversation. Alvin noticed they never laughed when they looked at him, though.

He was the last one left in the kitchen area besides Susan, who was doing dishes. He finished the last of his soup using the crust of bread to wipe the bowl clean before he walked it over to her. “I’ve been meaning to ask about the water and generators.”

“We have a pump run off the turbines we have, they supply the power to the cabin as well. With this many people, though they might not last as long as we hoped. But then, we also aren’t running the air filters, which helps. We hope they’ll keep going for a year or two, then we’ll have to replace them somehow.”

“Where are the turbines?”

“Inside the fence line, in an underground spring. It supplies the water and energy for us.”

Alvin though for a moment, then nodded, “It’s a good set up.”

“Dad worked on it right after he got out of the service. Mom helped. They had it all finished by the time I was born. Good thing, too, Dad might not have finished it on his own. Mom passed giving birth to me.”

“My condolences about your mom,” Alvin told her. “I never knew my parents. I was abandoned by them right after my birth. Given to foster care for my entire life, I never lived with any one foster parent for more than two years during my youth, and never more than a year once I started acting out.”

“Foster kid? I’ve heard good and bad stories about how that goes,” Susan said as she finished cleaning his bowl and set it into the rack to dry.

“Mostly the bad for me, then the worst, then more bad. I finally had a good foster parent during my last year in the system. She got me to stop fucking up and to start living a life.”

“Is she?”

“She is resting now,” Alvin replied. “I hope that she found the peace she deserved.”

“I’m sorry,” Susan said, stepping back from the sink. “I’m going to see if my turn for the shower is up. I’ll also stop by with a handgun for the doctor, so you can jazz it up for him. I don’t think he’s going to stay past tomorrow.”

“If only we can get so lucky,” Alvin dead panned as he watched her go.

“Alvin, you have a moment?” Bill asked from the doorway.

“What do you need?”

“Let’s go to my room,” Bill said as he turned to walk down the small hall.

Alvin followed, to find Frank waiting in the room as well. “Okay, so what’s up?”

“Bill said you can go back to your cell during the night,” Frank half asked. “I’m thinking you might want to stay there tonight.”

“Oh?”

“I’ve been watching Rahim,” Frank continued. “I think he’s unhinged enough to do something.”

“Can I take the pillow and blanket with me?” Alvin asked.

“Sure,” Bill replied. “We can see about adding more to our list tomorrow while we go house shopping.”

“House shopping,” Alvin laughed. “I guess that sounds a little better than theft or pillaging.”

“It might help James accept it,” Bill replied. “He was doing his best to help today, but I can see him straining against his old ideals. Frank and I will be brainstorming over the next few days as to what rules we really need. How much can you take with you at a time?”

“Ten items in my bags, or anything that’s on me at the time if it’s made a trip through the bags.”

Frank pursed his lips, “Can you see about upgrading my shotgun for me?”

Alvin sucked at his teeth for a second, “I don’t know how much XP I’m going to have tonight. Susan already wants me to prep a gun for stupid, I mean the doc. I can add it near the top of my list, but I can’t promise I can get it done tonight.”

“Fair enough,” Frank said as he grabbed his shotgun and handed it to Alvin. “If you can’t, then just bring it back with you.”

“Will do. I still need to do seventeen more guns for Bill.”

“They’re on the bed in the room you’re going to share,” Bill replied. “Take them in any order you want. You can even count Frank’s gun as one of the twenty. We have another fifty or so guns in the cabin.”

Laughing, Alvin shook his head, “I think I saved the right people, then.”

Bill snorted, “Please, I would have saved us just fine. It was just getting Susan to understand it needed to be done that was taking forever.”

Frank went quiet for a moment, “She went right after the Pope stopped talking. She looked at me with wide eyes, then she just collapsed.”

Alvin looked at Bill who shooed him, “You get going, Alvin. I’ll sit here with Frank.”

Nodding his thanks, Alvin stepped out of the room, quietly closing the door behind him, only to turn and find Susan there looking at him. “Err, hi?”

“Is dad okay?” Susan asked quietly. “I heard about the kids, and he’s had issues before…”

“He had a moment before we found Frank, but he seems to have rebounded from that. I stopped him from seeing the next set of kids that I shot. I didn’t think about the nurses or James until it was too late. Right now, Frank is in there breaking down over his wife and your dad is with him.”

“She was a good woman,” Susan sighed sadly. “It’s almost your turn for the shower. I’m after you, so please don’t take forever.” She reached for

the doorknob as Alvin moved aside, “I’ll just check on them.” She slipped into the room, her face laced with sadness.

Everyone else was in the main room, except Rahim and the brunette nurse whose name he still didn’t know. James looked up as Alvin walked in and waved him over to the loveseat where he and Terry were seated. “Alvin, I haven’t yet had the chance to properly thank you for saving Gran.”

“Like I told you then, that was the mission I’d been given at the time. Besides, she had just as much to do with getting her to safety as I did. Let me tell you a tale…” Alvin grinned as he took a seat on the floor and told James the entire story of getting Terry to safety. “You see, she’s as much to thank as I am. I’m not sure I could have taken those three zombies all at once if she hadn’t helped. Do you still have the guitar?”

“It’s in the car,” James replied. “I’ll go grab it.”

Terry watched him go with a smile on her face, “He was always a good boy. I fret some for my kids and other grandkids, but he called me when the Pope was talking and said he would come get me. When the phone went dead, my heart worried a bit. But he did as he said and came to get me, with your help of course.”

“I have no doubt he would have gotten you out without my aid,” Alvin chuckled. “The sheer relief on his face when he saw you told me how much he would have dared.”

“Takes after his father that way,” Terry mused. “I wonder how Danny is doing in Nevada? Him, Tammy and the girls with their kids…” She trailed off, her eyes full of worry for a moment. “I’m sure they’re fine, they had a group of friends around them and they all owned guns. Lord willing, they’re okay.”

Alvin snorted, “You think the Lord still wills anything?”

“Hard to say, but old habits, like old ladies, die hard,” Terry rejoined.

“Touché.”

“I haven’t kept in practice, so let’s see if I remember how to do this,” James said as he came into the front room carrying the case. “My catalogue of songs is small, Dad only ever showed me how to play the songs he loved. If you hate Robert Zimmerman, you are not going to like my music.”

“Isn’t he the guy who had more hit songs when others sung them, then when he did?” Alvin asked. “Like, All Along the Watchtower?”

“Yeah, that’s him. He’s done a bit of everything music wise, well besides rap. I’ll start with an easy one, Lay Lady Lay.” James pulled the guitar out of the case and tuned it for a moment before he looked up to find everyone watching him expectantly. “Umm…” he turned a bit red and looked over at Terry, who just laughed. “Thanks, Gran. Very helpful.”

“You’ll be fine. Besides, it’s not like there’s any other music to be had, so play.”

James started out hesitantly, but halfway through the first song he found his stride. He finished with the same nasal whine that Zimmerman was known for in his heyday. Bill and Frank shook their heads as the song came to an end.

“He wrote many good songs. He was just too anti-war for my tastes,” Bill added after the small round of applause died away. “Do you know any of his older folk songs?”

“Blind Willie McTell?” James asked.

Frank sat up straight at that, “He was a great musician, but I never heard Zimmerman do a song called that?”

“It was left off the Infidels album,” James replied as he started strumming.

When James came to the end of the song the room was silent for a moment. “He always did visual songs well,” Terry said breaking the silence.

“Yeah. He was called the voice of his generation, after all,” Bill added.

“He hated that,” James replied. “He called himself a song and dance man. He just wanted to sing and play, he never wanted all the attention.”

“Yet he helped shape the era,” Frank put in. “To people who served, like me and Bill, he was either loved or hated.”

“Just play, please,” Susan added a moment later, cutting off the debate.

Alvin ducked away during the singing to get his shower in. He could still vaguely hear the music as he washed up and shaved.

James played the few songs he could fully remember, with some of them singing along if they knew the words. After an hour, James called a halt as his voice cracked and his fingers started to ache. “That’s all I can do for now.”

“Thank you,” Susan said with a warm smile.

James returned the smile, “It was my pleasure. I was never good enough to make a living at it, but I do love playing. I didn’t get a lot of time once I joined the force, I had to mostly set it aside to protect and serve.”

“Thank you,” Betty added. “Your service was a blessing. It sometimes seemed that not many wore the badge with honor and pride.”

“My brothers on the force were mostly the best kind of people. But, there’s always an apple in every basket that you wish would get tossed.

Those few aside, they were good people and I hope they survive."

"If nothing else, you'll always have a spot here for a song," Bill put in. "Just, please, learn some other songs."

Chapter Sixteen

They broke up to head to bed shortly after that. Rahim and the brunette nurse came back inside from the yard. Rahim wore a smug smile, while the nurse seemed to be a bit pensive. Alvin sighed internally over the fact that the doc could get some action while he hadn't been offered any. Both Bill and Alvin noticed the byplay between Susan and James as the group headed down the hall towards the rooms.

Once they were in the bedroom, Alvin set about putting each of the guns laid out on the bed into his backpack, then took it right back out. He checked the first few guns, finding them all unloaded as he expected they would be, then just cycled them all through as quickly as he could. He also did the blanket and pillow. James and Rahim both watched him with puzzled expressions. Just as Alvin was finishing the game of 'what goes into the bag next?', a knock sounded at the door.

James was closest, so he opened it to reveal Susan there with a Glock. "Don't shoot, I surrender," James joked, even though Susan had the gun unloaded and hanging by her side, her finger well away from the trigger.

Shaking her head, she looked past James to Alvin, "Here." She tossed the gun gently underhand, which Alvin caught carefully. "It's unloaded currently."

Alvin grinned, "I figured. I don't think you would be winging loaded guns unless it was a do or die situation."

Susan nodded before her eyes went back to James, "I will wait to hear the terms of your surrender at a later time. Sleep well," her eyes seemed to sparkle as she shut the door on a flustered James.

James turned to look at Alvin, "Did she just…?"

“Looks like she’s interested,” Alvin nodded. “You might want to run that past Bill first, though. He is a mite protective, if you haven’t noticed. Just prove you’re worthy of his princess and I’m sure he won’t maim you… too badly.”

Rahim snorted as he lay down on the inflatable mattress he had been given to use. “Pointless, letting someone stand in the way of what you want.”

Alvin and James exchanged a glance before they both went to their respective beds. Alvin traded the bed for the air mattress that James had after a bit of back and forth. James seemed a bit perplexed as Alvin put the Glock into his belt pouch then laid down on the blanket with all the other guns wrapped up with him.

“Is that really comfortable?” James asked.

Alvin winked at him then vanished in a bright flash of light. James gasped and Rahim jerked upright with a barely muffled curse. James stared at the empty spot Alvin had just been in.

“Oh, he left. Good,” Rahim muttered, thinking Alvin had simply gone into the hall.

Alvin blinked as he, the blanket, all the guns, and the pillow appeared on his bunk in his cell. Chuckling, he put the guns aside carefully before he stood up. “Jarvis, I’m home. How is your day going?”

“Quietly, or at least it was until now,” came the droll reply. “Welcome back, sir. Did you wish crumpets and tea?”

“Ass,” Alvin laughed. “Glad to see you’re really starting to embrace your role.”

“I don’t see the point in fighting what is, like you humans always seem to do. Why are you back, this time?”

“More work, since I can’t upgrade shit at the settlement,” Alvin sighed as he used the john real fast.

“Actually…” Jarvis cut off and his voice went mechanical, “that data is not available at this time.”

Alvin blinked, “Huh, really? I’ll have to take another look at the table tomorrow.”

“What a fascinating idea,” Jarvis replied placidly. “Almost as if inspired by a higher being.”

“Higher being, eh?” Alvin chuckled, “I do kind of miss the banter with you, since I’m not here much anymore.”

“As it should be,” Jarvis replied.

“Such an ass.” Laughing, Alvin pulled up his XP summary. His laughter cut off as he read the breakdown.

World Mode Summary
Total Experience Earned: 34,215 XP
Breakdown: Settlement start-up 30,000 XP, Walkers killed 3,175 XP, Stockpile loot 540 XP, Viewer bonus 500 XP

“What the fuck?” Alvin finally managed to say.

“You gained the bonus for starting a settlement. That only happens once you have ten people all staying the night in a location that has a Draftsman’s table. There are other bonuses that can be awarded as well, for instance, if you build enough things.”

“What about that Viewer bonus?” Alvin asked.

“Your stream has gone live since you entered World Mode. You have had fifty viewers so far who have watched for at least an hour.”

“So, the more people who watch me the higher the bonus?”

“Correct,” Jarvis replied.

“Okay. This is going to take me a bit longer than I expected. I still need to check a few things.” He pulled off the leather jacket and got the M14 out of his backpack.

Leather Jacket (common)
Armor: 5
Durability: 50/50
Upgradable: 0/2

M14 (Uncommon)
Damage: 25
Durability: 334/400
Ammo type: 7.62x51 mm
Upgradable: 0/4

Alvin looked at the items he had picked up and applied the upgrades he wanted for them, increased durability and Armor for the Jacket and the M14 got Unlimited Ammo, increased durability, and lowered recoil.

Leather Jacket (common)
Armor: 7
Durability: 250/250
Upgradable: 2/2

M14 (Uncommon)
Damage: 25
Durability: 1,934/2,000
Ammo type: 7.62x51 mm
Upgradable: 3/4

Alvin smiled, now he had a rifle that would make some things much easier. Say for instance when the zombies were a hundred or more yards

away. He put the gun back into his bag, and he put the overly large jacket back on, then took it off again with a frown. He pulled up the store UI to see if he could fit it to his size. After a bit of poking and prodding he found the option for 500 XP. Sighing, he spent the XP since he'd already upgraded it.

When he put it back on, the leather slowly shrunk until it fit him as if made for him. "Well, that's nice if a little pricey over all, for something so minimal."

"Because clothing, fitted to your specific frame, is so easy to come by," Jarvis remarked dryly.

"Yeah, yeah," Alvin replied as he waved off the comment as if it were a fly. "I've still got lots to do."

"Oh, this ought to be amusing," Jarvis retorted before falling silent.

Alvin shook his head at the sarcastic butler AI and started to upgrade all the guns. He added unlimited ammo and durability to the seventeen he owed Bill, plus the shotgun for Frank. He only added unlimited ammo to the Glock, though.

He checked his total XP left after he had finished the guns, it left him at 17,500 XP. He picked up a medkit, figuring it might be handy to have one for emergencies, and dropped it into his belt pouch. He considered his options again, "Still need to upgrade my Personability."

"Only if you would like to be liked, or maybe even get a little action from a nurse or three," Jarvis commented.

"That would cost me," Alvin fiddled with the store functions for a bit then whistled, "15,400 XP to get it to an even 3.00."

"It was designed to be expensive to upgrade your base stats," Jarvis commented.

Alvin chewed his lip for a moment as he thought. If he upgraded his Personability, that would leave him a little over 1,000 XP. It would be enough for any one thing he was used to for now.

“Fuck,” Alvin sighed. “Without knowing all the costs of upgrading the settlement or even what it can be upgraded to, I’m stuck with going for a personal upgrade or hoarding it for now. Unless I want to dick around with coming back here again once everyone is awake.”

“Choices,” Jarvis intoned with the barest hint of humor, “that can be a real bitch.”

“Then again, Bill should have gotten a chunk of XP as well, though I don’t understand how he can upgrade things since he can’t come here.”

“That is a good point,” Jarvis said simply.

Alvin stopped for a moment then nodded, “I think I get it now. Well, I need to be more likeable if I want to try and get people to listen to me anyway.”

He spent the XP and upgraded his Personability to an even number, leaving him with 1,100 XP after he was done.

“Well, Jarvis I’m going to ferry all these guns back to the settlement. I might come back to sleep here or not. It depends on if Rahim is going to be an ass.”

“Sleep well sir, wherever you are.”

Alvin emptied his bags of everything so he could fill them with guns. He reappeared in the room with Rahim and James in a bright flash. Both men grumbled and rolled over as Alvin unloaded his bags and vanished in another flash. They both sat up, looking around for a moment before laying back down again. A minute later another flash caused them to sit upright again to see Alvin unloading his bags of guns.

“Do you mind? We are trying to sleep, asshole,” Rahim snapped before he rolled himself back in his blanket.

James yawned, shrugging as he lay back down, “Night, Alvin.”

“Night, James. See you in the morning,” Alvin replied before he vanished again with another bright flash.

Rahim jumped to his feet to berate Alvin, only to find himself with no target. Cursing, he laid back down again, muttering the whole time.

“Trying to sleep, remember,” James said with a smirk.

Rahim let out a long sigh before he turned over and went back to sleep.

Alvin put all his stuff back in his bags before he curled up on his stone bench with newly acquired pillow and blanket, drifting to sleep himself.

He woke sometime later and sat up, stretching, “Morning, Jarvis.”

“Good morning, sir. Going out to battle the forces of undeath again today?”

“Of course, I don’t have a spare life to give,” Alvin replied as he flushed the toilet. “Stay safe in here.”

“I hope you don’t die horribly today,” Jarvis replied just before the light took Alvin away.

Alvin returned to find the room occupied only by a snoring Rahim. James was not in evidence and the bed he’d slept in was neatly made. Getting up as quietly as he could, Alvin stepped out of the room. He shut the door quietly and turned to find Betty standing in the hall. She was wearing some baggy clothes that looked like they were Susan’s.

“Morning,” Alvin greeted her.

“Good morning,” Betty was frowning slightly as she looked him over. “Did you change something last night? Did you get a haircut or something?”

Chuckling, Alvin shrugged, “Who can say, really? Is everyone else up already?”

Chewing her lip slightly, Betty nodded, “Everyone but Rahim and you are already up. Breakfast should be ready shortly. Susan asked if I could check to see if you were in.”

“Well then, shall we?” Alvin said, motioning her towards the kitchen.

“Umm, yes…” Betty said with another searching look at Alvin as she tried to puzzle out what was different about him.

Alvin just grinned, glad that raising his Personability seemed to have an immediate effect. He followed her towards the kitchen, grinning at her reaction.

When they entered the main room, all the seats were taken. Alvin nodded to the room in greeting, only to get puzzled looks from the group as they eyed him. “Morning. Did you all sleep well?”

Terry replied first, “I slept fine.” She squinted hard at him, “Did you go spending your XP last night?”

“Very perceptive, Gran,” Alvin chuckled. “Yes, I used a chunk of what I earned yesterday to fix my biggest weakness.”

“That explains why I feel more inclined to trust you than I did yesterday,” Terry nodded. “What was it, Personability?”

“That’s the one,” Alvin agreed. “Maybe now you can all accept me without all the frowns.”

James snorted, “Still blunt, though. It was funny listening to Rahim bitch last night when you came and went. What was with that?”

“Was ferrying the guns I upgraded for Bill back here.”

“Oh, right. Do you have enough left to upgrade my pistol or my shotgun?” James asked sitting forward slightly. “I wanted to join you two today on point.”

“Did you get my gun?” Frank queried from his spot in the rocking chair.

“I can get yours done, James, but I only have enough to do one right now and that will tap me out. Grab whichever one you want upgraded first and I’ll take care of it before we head out. I do have to be in the bedroom to go back to my cell.” As he spoke, he pulled Frank’s shotgun from his bag and handed it over, “Did yours last night.”

“Thank you kindly. I can’t tell if it’s your upgraded stat that makes me want to like you more or the fact that you did me a favor. Also, do you have to be in a secured room?”

“That is the caveat, yeah,” Alvin agreed. “And it’s probably a bit of both, truth be told. Doing favors makes most people view you with a little more trust, but the stat boost will make you more predisposed towards me all around.”

“Breakfast,” Susan called out from the kitchen. “Terry, you can stay where you are, I’ll have James bring you a plate.”

Getting to his feet, Alvin chuckled, “The blessing of family.” Even though he chuckled there was a faint bitterness to his words.

James got to his feet, slapping Alvin on the back, “You have pseudo-family now, though. This community will turn into a family-like environment.”

Alvin paused while he considered the words. He was still considering it when Terry spoke up, “You do call me Gran, after all.”

Looking back at the smiling grandma, Alvin nodded, “Thank you.” He got in line where Susan was handing plates of eggs and steak strips. “Wow, fancy today.”

“Have to get through the perishables,” Susan replied, eyeing him for a moment with her lips pursed. “You upgraded?”

“Yup,” Alvin chuckled as he took his plate. “Thank you for the food.”

James stopped next to him with a smirk, a plate in each hand. “Want to hand this off to Gran for me?”

“Thank you,” Alvin said as he took the plate for Terry. He heard a few whispered conversations pick up behind him, which he ignored. He handed Terry her plate, then handed Frank the other plate. “I’ll go grab another.”

Frank nodded, “Mighty kind of you.”

“Thank you,” Terry added.

Alvin smiled to them both only to meet James bringing a second plate out of the kitchen. “I had one for Frank, but I guess it’s yours now, Alvin.”

“Call me Al,” Alvin said as he took his seat. “I don’t care for the full name, too much teasing in school.”

“I normally go by Terry myself, though my real name is Teresa,” Terry added as she finished a bite. “Though Gran works as well.”

Conversation died away as everyone dug into their food. Bill came in, nodding at everyone and headed for the kitchen to get his own plate. He came back in with a loaded plate and found a spot to settle. “Coffee will be up shortly. We need to go over what that table can do.”

“After breakfast?”

“After breakfast is fine,” Bill agreed.

“I also need to take a quick trip back to my cell, for James.”

“That’s fine, as you’ll finish before me,” Bill said as he took his first bite.

Chapter Seventeen

Everyone headed out to the firing range after breakfast. Alvin handed James his improved shotgun.

"Pump shotguns reload differently since they don't have clips. You'll need to flick the safety on for a three count before it's ready to go again. However, it does fully reload the gun, which means it will have one in the chamber ready to fire when you take the safety off."

"Mine as well?" Frank asked.

"Yes, looks like all pump guns reload that way. Revolvers reload if you open the chamber and give it a spin. I can't wait to find out how a belt-fed works, I'm sure we'll find out eventually."

Alvin looked around and realized that everyone but Rahim was gathered around, watching and listening as Alvin went over the gun modifications. "Group outing?"

"We're all curious about that table, and what growing the Settlement is going to entail," Terry replied.

Bill stopped by the table, motioning Alvin to it. Alvin stepped over and brought up the 3D holographic display of the Settlement. This time a single item was lit up, Scrapper. Alvin tapped it to get information on it.

Scrapper: This building may be placed for free. The Scrapper converts unwanted junk into material usable for other buildings. Anything placed inside will be scrapped. There is a one hour cooldown between scrap cycles.

Alvin took his hand off the table and stepped back, "Okay, so we build the Scrapper and then have to get stuff up here for it to break down.

Then use the material it gives for other buildings. Seems pretty straightforward, which means we just haven't found the catch yet."

Susan nodded, "We get to place it for free though, so it doesn't hurt to do so. I was thinking of putting it in the far back corner from here so it's out of the way."

"If we have to take stuff to it, though, then either of the front corners closer to the gate make more sense," Alvin replied.

"Aesthetic against functionality," Bill sighed. "I prefer functionality, every time."

Susan shook her head, "I know, but we don't know what it's going to look like, smell like, or sound like. I'm not sure the front is the best place for it."

"I have to say your father is right on this one, Susan," Frank opined.

"Do we want it close though, if it winds up belching smoke and smells?" Betty asked, looking at the redheaded nurse, who shook her head.

"Bill, it's actually your place," Alvin said, stepping back, "I recommend the front, though. I don't think we want to be dragging big stuff, like ruined cars, all the way through the compound."

Susan paused, then nodded, "He has a point there. Okay, front it is."

Alvin touched the table, selected the Scrapper and indicated where he wanted it built. A bright light flared over in the front corner of the yard. When it vanished a large metal structure, sixty feet in length and thirty feet high now stood there.

"Well, that is a big building," Alvin chuckled.

The whole group walked over to look at it. The entire front of the building was a huge sliding door that was raised and lowered with a hand

crank. On the side was a conveyor belt, with a small sign that said output.

Alvin touched the metal building and got a pop-up, so he looked it over before smiling. “Okay guys, this is how it works. You place the items you want to scrap inside, then roll the door down. Once the door is closed you press the red button, it begins to scrap the items, and the material will come out the side conveyor.”

Bill touched the building and frowned, examining the building information for himself. “This can be upgraded. Looks like we’ll get more material out of it per scrap when we do.”

Alvin went back to the table. “Okay, so we have new plans going forward. We want to drag everything we possibly can back here. Dead cars, anything not nailed down really well, and eventually we’ll probably even want to tear down the houses and bring the pieces here” Alvin was flipping through information provided by the table as he spoke, “The Settlement is built and upgraded using Settlement XP. Oh, hey, we can also get all the beginning production buildings for free now that the Scrapper is built.”

He looked over the buildings, “Ore processor, lumber mill, butcher shop, garden, textiles, chemical plant, and quarry.”

“Two of them are food suppliers?” Susan asked

“Butcher shop and garden,” Alvin told her as he started to place the buildings inside the gated area.

“That works for me,” Susan agreed.

Alvin tapped the display, setting all the buildings up. The firing range was now bracketed by buildings. As they appeared, the group dispersed to check them out.

Susan was frowning as she stood inside the butcher shop when Alvin walked in. “It will produce only mystery meat until it’s upgraded,

three pounds every eight hours. But I can’t get it to actually do anything, or find out anything else.”

Alvin sighed, “Well, it’s a start. Let’s hope the Settlement XP goes up quick enough that we can work with it. Does someone have to stay here for it to work?”

“Not that I can see,” Susan replied.

Alvin touched the plain counter area that took up a portion of the back wall. A pop-up confirmed what Susan had just relayed to him. He did notice the indication that the building could produce other stuff once it was given samples of the product. “Susan, grab me a bit of ground beef, a chunk of chicken breast and a bit of bacon, please.”

She frowned, but went back to the house without any argument. She was back a few minutes later carrying a small plate with portions of each meat. Alvin took the plate and placed the chicken on the counter. The meat vanished with a small flash of light and Alvin smiled at the notification that popped up. He set the other two portions of meat onto the counter in turn, with identical results.

“There, it can now produce each of those types of meat in addition to the mystery meat.” He checked the production time and winced. “A lot slower, though, it’ll take a full day to produce three pounds of chicken or bacon or ground beef.”

“I can work with that for now. It will be faster once it upgrades, right?”

“I fucking hope so,” Alvin shrugged. “Okay, let’s check the other buildings.”

The mill would only produce particle board to start with. The ore processor would only give out pot metal, and the quarry gave out pea gravel. Each of the buildings would take samples to produce more things, with similarly slowed production times for anything above basic material.

“Susan, while we’re in town if you could feed these buildings a bit of everything. If we bring back stuff that hasn’t been added, snag it please,” Alvin requested and got a nod in return.

“We should get a trailer for the rig,” Bill commented. “We can also use the rig along with my heavy chains to drag the cars up here.”

The redheaded nurse raised her hand, “What can we do?”

Alvin cut in, “I have a plan, and it’s going to take all the hands we can get, minus Susan to hold the fort and give our buildings more stuff to do. The four guys will go into the first few streets and make sure there aren’t any zombies wandering around. Once it’s clear, we drag all the bodies into a pile and burn them, we don’t want the corpses laying around. Once we have the bodies cleared out of the houses, the ladies will begin the process of taking everything you can out to the curb for us. I mean everything that you can shift. This is going to take a lot longer than what we were doing before. The guys will carry out the furniture and fixtures. We’ll leave the houses standing for now, but we’ll go street by street stripping them bare.”

“We should prioritize upgrading the cabin to make the living space better for the numbers we have.” Susan looked at Alvin, who nodded agreement at her words.

No one had any questions or other ideas to offer, so they all got ready to head out for the day. James stopped next to Alvin for a moment, “You don’t have designs on Susan, do you?”

Alvin laughed, “Gods, no, but I wouldn’t mind getting some hot nurse action. The redhead is my type, not that I’ve heard her name yet. Bill said he liked the look of Betty, so I’m leaving her alone.”

“Bridget is her name,” James chuckled. “You think you would even have a chance if you don’t know her name?”

“Well, today she hasn’t frowned at me yet, so there is hope.”

Half an hour later, they were ready to head out. Frank drove the truck down with the guys in the bed. James drove behind them with the nurses in his car. The brunette nurse was with them today, though she seemed uncertain.

At the first street, Alvin walked over to Bill after they had stopped the vehicles. “How’s your shoulder?”

“Sore. According to my character sheet it’s down two health.”

“I’ll see about getting you a medkit after today,” Alvin told him. “I would have last night but I spent all my XP upgrading the guns.”

“Huh, okay.”

“Which reminds me, I can bring the recoil of that down for you, so its stops kicking as hard. Well, after I get some more XP, that is.”

“Sounds good,” Bill’s lips turned slightly up in a smile.

Alvin looked over as James and Frank joined them. The nurse group started to clear the bodies out the houses one by one, dragging them into a pile for burning. The guys worked on clearing the bodies littering the street.

Clearing the first street went fast, as no zombies were found. The nurses started on clearing the first house of all items. Alvin noticed them chatting as they worked before the guys turned onto the second street.

“Think it will be okay to leave them alone?” Frank asked.

“Should be, but one of us can stay back if you think it’s a good idea,” Bill replied.

“Let Frank do it, they all seem comfortable around him. They also won’t be as distracted as they would be if it was James instead,” Alvin

chuckled.

James shook his head, “Ass. I do agree though, they seem to be calmer with Frank around. Must be the grandfatherly vibe.”

Frank frowned at them, “Not respecting your elders, you two. I’ll go, it’ll make me feel better knowing they have cover if needed.”

Bill nodded, “Alright. After we clear this street we’ll head back and start moving the furniture.”

“See you shortly, then,” Frank commented as he turned back.

They had just finished the second street when James looked up, “I hear a car.”

The other two paused and nodded, just now hearing the sound of an engine. “Flag them down?” Alvin asked.

“Might as well, we can use more hands,” Bill replied.

They stepped away from the piled zombie corpses to wait for the approaching car. A minute later a station wagon came around the corner and Alvin’s lips ticked up in a grin. He stripped off the medical gloves he’d been wearing, so he didn’t end up with zombie goo on his hands.

“I got this,” Alvin told the other two as he stepped forward and waved at the oncoming car. It had slowed as the driver caught sight of the three armed men. Alvin kept his hands visible as he waited for the car to approach.

The car crept forward then stopped as Alvin came even with the driver. He leaned down to grin into the shocked face of Gothy, Becky, behind the wheel. “What are you doing here?” she asked as she eyed him.

“Looting at the moment, my friends back there and me. We have a safe place set up and we’re starting on building a Settlement. We have room

for a few more…" Alvin was interrupted by the sound of somebody groaning in anguish from the back seat.

Gothy looked back over her shoulder with a blank face before she looked back at Alvin. "My father, he lost most of his arm before we got out of our last stop."

"He needs help but we haven't found anyone," David said from the passenger seat, anguish clear in his voice.

"We have three nurses with us. I think I have a better solution, though." Alvin smirked at Becky, who was looking at him with a small frown as if trying to figure something out. "Open the package and place it on your father's arm." He held out his single medkit.

David came around the car and snatched it, yanking open the back door and clambering back into the car in almost a single motion. He ripped the package open and placed it on his father's arm before Becky could object. The thick bandage on the man's bicep was soaked red as David held his breath.

"David, we don't know…" Becky started but stopped as soon as her father's breathing evened out and he stopped groaning in pain.

"Holy fuck," David exclaimed as he watched the bandage bulge as his father's missing flesh was reappearing. He cut the bandage off, staring in fascination as the skin regrew around the open wounds. "Dad?"

The cop in riot gear in the back seat opened his eyes, blinking as he looked around. "What happened?"

Becky looked behind her, watching as her father roused. "He is going to make it," She tried to make the words sound happy, but Alvin felt there was a touch of malice to them.

David looked at Alvin with tears running down his cheeks. His father was eyeing the trio of armed men outside the car with a frown. Becky

turned back around to face the front with a fixed expression.

“Who are you?” the man asked as he continued to watch the trio.

“Al, Wild Bill and James,” Alvin replied. “We got your arm patched up. I also helped get your kids out of school in one piece.”

David cut in, “This is the guy I was telling you about.”

Sighing, the no-longer injured cop shook his head, “I barely remember that.”

“Must be memory loss due to recent trauma,” Becky finally said. “We’re in Green River right now. Al is the guy who got us out of school. He says they have a safe place set up, it sounds like they’ll let us stay with them.”

“It’s Bill’s place actually, but we’re starting up a Settlement for the survivors of this shit. We ask that you help with the work is all. I’m sure you’re all exhausted from your ordeal. You can head up to the compound and get some food, a shower and some sleep for now.”

“I think that would be best,” Bill added. “Once you’ve had a chance to rest we can talk, if you want to stay on.”

James finally chimed in, “Sergeant Woodrow?”

The cop looked at James, “Officer Wilson, you’re with them?”

James nodded, “They’re giving me and my gran a place to stay, sir. I can vouch for them, well minus the asshole doc up at the house. You can’t do better than here, right now, sir.”

Sergeant Woodrow got out of the car. David followed, looking confused and relieved in equal measure. Sergeant Woodrow offered a hand to Bill, wincing as Bill pulped it. “We thank you for your offer. This is Rebecca, my son David, and I’m Will.” He looked at his daughter, still

behind the wheel, “Rebecca Woodrow, get out of the car.” She did as ordered with a twist to her lips, but she didn’t say anything.

Nodding, Bill released the hand, “My daughter Susan is holding the fort. Go up the road past our friends, it’s about five-ish miles. We’ll let her know on the CB that you’re coming.”

“After I get something in my stomach I’ll be back down here to help,” Will told them as he got into the driver’s seat of the car. “Get in, David. Rebecca, you sit in the back.”

David thanked them as he got into the front seat. Becky wore a fixed expression, her jaw muscles jumping as she ground her teeth. She got into the back seat without comment.

“Good to see you both again, David, Gothy,” Alvin added as the car started. He made eye contact with them both.

David smiled back and Becky smirked at Alvin. “See you later, hero,” Becky replied, with a smirk before her father drove off.

Bill grunted, “Little young for you, isn’t she?”

Alvin laughed, “Eighteen, I think. I’m only twenty-six. I just wanted to cheer her up, she apparently hates her full name.”

“I doubt her father will be happy with that idea,” James added.

“David is the kid I told you about who rigged a bomb in the Chem room of his high school. He’ll be a big help. Gothy there was pretty fearless about the whole zombie thing, so I think she’ll hold it together. Their father is a blank to me.”

“He was a sergeant on the bomb squad,” James added as the group started back towards the others. “He’s a good sergeant, I’ve talked to him on and off over the years. He should be able to keep it together.”

“If you are vouching for him, then I am sure he is fine,” Bill replied. “If David has skills with bombs, as well as Will, then they can be a valuable addition to our Settlement.”

Frank walked towards them as they approached, “The car that went by, they heading up?”

“A bomb squad sergeant with his two teen kids,” Bill relayed the story. “Need to use the CB to tell Susan.”

“I’ll handle it,” James said, breaking into a jog for the truck.

Alvin snorted, earning him a look from Bill, so Alvin lowered his voice. “I think James likes your daughter.”

A sigh escaped Bill’s lips, “She told me last night to stay out of it, so seems like that’s going to be a two-way street.”

Frank grinned, “They grow up so fast. I mean, here she is only in her twenties, and finally finding her first boyfriend.”

“Wait, she never…” Alvin cut off, looking at Bill. “Yeah, never mind. I get it.”

Bill punched Alvin in the shoulder, then rubbed his knuckles, “You upgrade that jacket?

Grinning, Alvin nodded, “Yeah. Good thing, or my shoulder would probably be dislocated about now.”

Frank laughed, “Good to see him finally letting her live a little. It only took the end of the world for that to happen.”

Bill flung his one empty hand into the air, “Screw you guys, I’m going to see if the nurses need anything.”

Frank and Alvin watching him go, both chortling. “It seems he’s finally willing to let her grow,” Frank said softly. “Good, it’s time we all start looking forward.” His eyes dimmed as he recalled his own recent past, obviously not ready yet himself.

Alvin patted his shoulder as they walked after the others. He had no idea what to say as he didn’t have the empathy to connect with the older man.

“The first two houses are cleared,” Bill told them as they got closer. “We can move the furniture out first. Load up the truck, then pile everything else on top of that. James can drive it up and get it unloaded into the scrapper, then come back down.”

“Fun times,” Alvin replied as he started walking to the first house. “Let’s do this.”

They called a halt just after noon for lunch. They had cleared six houses in that time. The Scrapper seemed mostly empty even with all the stuff from the houses they’d cleared. They walked into the main room to find Rahim and Susan in a shouting match. Will, Becky and David looked on with expressions of anger or embarrassment, depending on who you looked at.

Rahim stood toe to toe with Susan, shouting into her face. “You are only setting these new people up to become drones for you,” His face was red, and a vein stood out on his forehead. “This tidy little budding dictatorship…”

Bill slammed his hand against the wall. The sudden noise echoed in the room, cutting Rahim off mid-shout. “That is enough!” Bill’s voice was the echo of thunder during a thunderstorm. “Get out of my house, or I will remove you by force.” Bill said, his voice dropping to a low, threatening tone as he handed his gun to Frank.

Rahim held up his hands, looking at the new trio of people, “You see what I mean. If you object to anything, this is how they will treat you.”

Alvin broke into laughter, “Gods, you just don’t know when to stop. Gothy, did I not tell you to leave me behind before? I was more concerned with you and David getting out than I was with me being safe or bandaged, right?” Becky nodded, staring at Rahim angrily, so Alvin continued. “So you, all of you, might want to take his words with a grain of salt. The first time I met him, his flunky tried to brain me. The second time I met him, he punched me in the face while demanding the keys to the truck. This man, while a doctor, is also an idiot.”

“You threatened to kill us the first time, and you sprained my wrist the second time,” Rahim rebutted as Susan shifted around behind him.

“Correction, I put my gun in the face of the guy who pulled back to brain me with a strut. You sprained your own wrist by punching me in the face, dumb ass. Now, goodnight,” Alvin grinned.

Susan wrapped Rahim up from behind. As Rahim began to struggle Bill stepped forward and punched the good doctor square in the solar plexus. Rahim sagged into the stranglehold Susan had applied and was soon out cold. The brunette nurse seemed torn on what to do, the other two touched her shoulders, speaking quietly to her as they led her down the hall away from the scene. Bill slung Rahim over his shoulder and walked with him towards the exit. Frank went with, after Susan handed him the Glock that Alvin had upgraded last night.

Will cleared his throat, “Can someone explain to us what in the hell is going on?”

Terry had been rocking in the rocking chair the whole time, watching the scene unfold with interest. “I think I can fill you in. I’ve heard everyone’s story so far. Susan, is the food almost done?”

Susan gave the newcomers an apologetic look, “Sorry for the hubbub. Food will be up shortly.”

Alvin was just about to say something when Frank came back into the room. “Alvin, Bill needs you to go get us a vehicle so the doc can leave.”

“Well, there’s a decent selection down in town, let me grab a sandwich and I’ll take a walk.”

“I’ll grab a sandwich and drive you down,” Becky suggested.

Will frowned, his voice terse, “Rebecca…”

“Stop it, dad. He got us out alive. He is the only reason you are whole and functional right now. I can think of few people I feel safer around right now than him.” Becky turned to Susan, who was watching with pursed lips, “Can I get a sandwich to go as well, please?”

“If you do anything to my daughter…” Will started.

Alvin cut him off, “She will be returned just as pure as she is now. Come on, Gothy, let’s scoot.”

“Her name is Rebecca, not Gothy,” Will snapped as the two walked away.

Susan caught up to them a moment later with sandwiches, just past the first door. Exiting the bunker, they found Bill and Frank standing over the irate, bound doctor. “Ah, a turkey, all trussed up and nowhere to go,” Alvin chuckled. “Getting a ride down with Gothy, here. I’ll bring back a car for him. Sandwiches are ready, so Frank might want to grab you two some while you wait for us.”

Frank nodded and went back inside. Bill said nothing as he kept his eyes on Rahim. “It doesn’t have to be fancy, it just needs to run.”

“Right you are,” Alvin said getting into the station wagon. A moment later they were on the road back to town, with Alvin eating hungrily.

“How are you going to get a car?” Becky asked between bites of her own sandwich as she drove slowly down the road.

“Hotwire, or use the screwdriver trick,” Alvin replied as he took another bite. “Only cars from the seventies or earlier seem reliable, though a few from the early eighties seem to work as well. We found at least eight the other day that I got started once, I’ll grab one of them. There’s this nice sixty-nine Mustang down there, too. He isn’t going to get that one, though.”

“What color is it?” Becky asked.

“White, but I might be able to change that in the future. Remember what I had said? This is like a game, we just started the Settlement portion of it. So we might get a garage or something that helps with cars.”

“Sounds good to me. Can I have that one later?” Becky asked glancing over at him as she licked jelly off her fingers slowly while she watched him.

Alvin felt blood rush south and he shifted slightly as he cleared his throat. He took a moment to really look at her as she finished cleaning her fingers. Raven haired, like her brother, light blue eyes that stood out against her hair. Her skin was pale but had a touch of sun to it. His eyes drifted down her form, stopping at her ample chest that bounced as they hit a rut in the road. A little more padded than conventional beauty held, but he always liked them a bit thick.

“Gothy,” Alvin smirked at her knowing eyes. “I told your dad I would return you as pure as when you left.”

“Good thing I’m not pure then, isn’t it?” she husked at him as she pulled over to the side of the road, putting the car into park. “Maybe I can thank you for saving me earlier.” She undid her seatbelt as she slid over towards him across the front bench seat. “If you’re up for it,” her hand went to his lap, her smile widening. “I see you are, indeed.”

Shaking his head, Alvin thanked his stars that he'd upgraded his Personability earlier. "Isn't this a little too monster movie cliché?"

Becky frowned slightly even as she stroked him through his jeans, "The world just ended and you have a willing woman wanting you and you think we shouldn't?"

Alvin took a breath, trying not to give in to the powerful distraction of her hand, "Just would hate to be eaten by zombies."

"Then keep your eyes open," she replied as she started to undo his belt and pants. "You will be responsible for our safety, Hero." She smirked up at him as his cock sprang free of his jeans. "I'll be in charge of this." She stopped talking at that point, her mouth suddenly full.

Alvin moaned, his eyes closing as his head fell back against the headrest as she began to eagerly and aggressively suck him. "Oh, fuck. Gothy, you've had practice at this." With an effort he raised his head and opened his eyes in an attempt to keep eyes on the road.

A happy hum was his only reply as she went all the way to the base of him, her nose buried in his pubic hair. She held herself there for a second as her tongue worked on the underside of his shaft. After a few seconds, she began to slowly came back up his length, making happy sounds the entire time.

Alvin gripped the door with his one hand, his other on the back of the seat as he fought to keep his eyes open. He was as close to heaven as he had been in a long time as he let her have her way with him. "I really fucking hope you're old enough for this," he managed to get out.

As she came up she let him pop out of her mouth with a small sound. "Old enough to know what I want. Now shut up. Or better yet, talk dirty to me, but no more small talk." She went back to work, making Alvin grunt as she slid her lips straight down his full length.

“You’re such a dirty little slut,” Alvin managed as he felt his heart really begin to pump. Becky moaned around his shaft and gave him a couple of short hard bobs. “Oh, so you like that... slut?” He paused before adding the last word, which got him another rapid bob of her head. He panted as he brought his left hand down hard on her ass.

Becky let out a small growl as she went all the way down and began to work her throat muscles around the head of his cock. She wiggled her ass against his hand, encouraging him to get on with it.

Letting go of the door, Alvin grabbed her hair with his right hand as he pulled her up his shaft, while he spanked her again with the other hand. She let out a moan as her mouth came free of him.

“Fuck, finally. Come on Hero, show me if you can handle me,” she panted at him, her eyes full of lust as she reached out to stroke him with one hand. “Let me suck you ‘til you shoot it down my throat, or take me into the back seat and fuck me like the cock loving bitch I am.”

Alvin felt his balls tighten as she kept her hand going, “Gods, you are an eager one.” He paused, his breath catching slightly, “Fuck, not going to last long enough to fuck you.”

She strained against his hand holding her hair, “Let me go, then. I’ll swallow every drop, but tonight you have to fuck me.”

Alvin grunted as he pushed her eager mouth all the way back down his cock as she began to fondle his balls. “Oh gods, where were you when I was eighteen? I could have used an eager slut like you.” He pulled her head up slightly and began to buck his hips up into her mouth. “I’ll fuck your mouth now, your pussy will get it later.”

Becky just moaned louder, straining against his hand slightly where it was tangled in her hair. As Alvin felt his orgasm starting he pushed her head all the way down and began to spank her again with firm swats.

“Take it all, you cum hungry slut,” he moaned as he spanked her again and again as his seed filled her mouth. He felt her throat working to swallow all of it as his hips spasmed against her mouth. He was aware of her moaning loudly as she took every drop of him.

Panting, he let go of her hair and collapsed into the seat. He shuddered as she slowly started to come up his spent shaft inch by inch, her tongue licking every inch of him. She paused at the tip and gave it a hard suck for a second before she sat back and met his gaze.

“Now that is how I wanted to thank my hero,” she told him as she wiped at her lips to make sure she hadn’t missed any. “Tonight though, you have to thank me.”

Alvin laughed softly as he looked around them, becoming aware that he’d utterly failed his job as lookout. Luckily for them, no zombies were in sight. “Your dad is going to have kittens.”

“Fuck him, he only cared about his job anyway,” Becky smirked as she slid back to the driver’s side. “Now, where am I taking you?”

Chapter Eighteen

“Stop here,” Alvin informed her as she got to the corner of Main. He pointed to a Chevy Vega down the street, “That’s going to be his car.”

Gothy smirked as she eyed the Mustang sitting beyond the Vega. “That one behind it can be my car.”

Alvin got out of the car, leaning down to look into the open window. “You might have to earn it.”

Her eyes glinted as her lips quirked up, “Sounds like my kind of challenge, hero.”

Alvin laughed, “You’re kind of nuts. Lucky for you, I like the crazy ones.”

Becky laughed as she pulled away, leaving him alone in town. Alvin pulled his gun, he didn’t see anything immediately as he cautiously started toward the Vega, but it made sense to be ready. Dead zombies still littered the road, baking in the September sun. Alvin wrinkled his nose as he passed, checking to be sure each corpse had a gunshot wound to the head. He came to the second pile up and frowned as he saw movement behind the wrecks. He fired a single shot, not with any real chance to hit but more to get the attention of whatever it was that was moving.

A black shape, dog-like, went running off after the single shot. Alvin frowned. Now they had another reason to deal with the bodies. Some of the corpses near where he’d seen the dog-thing had been chewed on. At the Vega, he looked back the way he’d come and winced at how tight the fit was going to be to get the car free. He got into the front seat and dug a screwdriver out of his fanny pack, glad they stacked to five earlier when he’d found identical craftsmen sets in multiple homes.

He started the car, wondering how many more times it could be managed before the ignition broke. He carefully started to maneuver the car out of the mess. It took him close to ten minutes to get it loose, scraping it a few times on other cars and even once carefully nudging another car a few inches out of the way. The passenger side mirror came free at one point during all the maneuvering. He finally cleared the pile up and started up the road to the compound.

As Alvin pulled in, they all looked over at the banged-up car he was driving. He got it turned around, parked so it was pointing out the gate.

“Here it is, a car for Rahim,” Alvin said as he got out.

“Why that car?” the brunette nurse asked with a frown.

“I can go back and get a different one, I mean eventually they’ll all be up here. This one has a mostly full tank, though. Are you going with Rahim?” Alvin asked the nurse.

“I…” she paused, looking from Rahim to the other two nurses, “I’m going to stay.”

Rahim started to mumble around the gag Bill had fashioned for him. Bill leaned down and cut the gag free, so Rahim could talk. “Barb, you said you would go with me. We promised last night. You don’t want to stay with these people, we talked about this.”

“She would rather stay in a safe place with her friends than go out into the unknown with you,” Betty snapped at him. “You never looked at her twice before all this. But you sure as fuck slept with her last night though, claiming you had some plan. Well, where is that plan now?”

Barbara turned away, clearly embarrassed, her head slumped forward so her hair hid her face. “Maybe I should go…”

Bridget came up and touched Barb's arm gently, "It's fine, Barb. We told you he was just trying to use you. He thinks if he can convince you to go then he might be able to get others to as well. He tried to convince me after dinner while you showered, and had a go at Betty even before that."

"So, I'm his last choice, then?" Barbara asked, her voice turning shaky as she tried to hold back tears.

"Time to go, doc," Bill said, lifting him up and carrying him to the car. "I'll put the gun in the trunk. You can get it once you're out of sight. If you fail to leave right away or try to get the gun while in sight, I will kill you myself."

"This is an outrage! I am a doctor!" Rahim screamed.

"Don't need one if we can get medkits," Alvin replied. "You couldn't have patched up Will's arm like I did today. It's now a fully functional arm, instead of a shredded mess of muscle and bone."

Will shifted a little uncomfortably as Alvin reminded him that he was owed a debt. He said nothing though as he glanced at his daughter, who was eyeing Alvin openly.

Susan opened the trunk via the switch inside the car and set a bag and the gun inside, then slammed the trunk closed. "Food for you as promised and a gun with unlimited ammo. If you set even a single foot back on this property, one of us will end you." She stepped back as Bill set the doctor into the car before he cut the tape loose.

"Get going," Bill said as he shut the car door.

Barbara watched the scene with a mixture of sadness and anger. Everyone else watched with apathy for the most part. Rahim glared at Bill before he turned to look at Barbara, "You did this to yourself. No one else will want a useless bitch like you. You didn't even know how to suck cock properly." He gunned the engine, peeling out of the compound and sending gravel flying up behind him.

Barbara slumped to her knees, crying. Bridget and Betty hugged her tightly as they knelt next to her speaking softly. Bill went past them all and into the house, followed by Susan and Frank. The two nurses got Barbara on her feet and guided her inside. James and Teresa followed after them a moment later. Will and David went next, leaving Alvin and Becky alone outside.

Becky smirked at him, licking her lips suggestively before she went inside as well. Her black skirt swung from side to side as she let her body sway. Alvin watched her go, thinking about what he wanted to do to her later.

Bill interrupted his thoughts as he came back out of the bunker. “We good?”

“I was thinking, actually. We need to change things up some,” Alvin replied. “All the bodies are starting to become puppy chow for feral dogs plus being a serious health hazard for us. So, outside of Frank and the nurses, we need to mow through town and kill as many zombies as we can find. We need to find a trailer for the rig, so we can pile the corpses into it. The fastest way to get rid of the bodies will be to stack them on a trailer then shove them into the Scrapper, trailer and all.

Will, David and Becky came out of the bunker, each dressed in jeans and a shirt and joined the others listening to Alvin and Bill. “We are willing to pitch in,” Will stated when they got close enough.

“Add in David and Will to the cleansing team, and Gothy can go with the nurses and Frank,” Alvin added.

Bill nodded, “Okay. That is the plan, then. We can take the wagon into town as well as the truck.” Becky held up a hand and Bill nodded to her.

“I can help play guard while helping loot the houses, if you want to hand me one of those guns,” Becky held out her hand to Alvin, who shook

his head.

“Susan will get you one. This one is mine,” Alvin stated simply. Becky’s lips thinned slightly before she went off to the bunker at a jog to get a gun. Alvin looked away from her to Will, “You two need to grab guns from the house as well, we’re on zombie duty.”

Both of them started back for the house, only to meet Becky as she came back out carrying two shotguns in addition to the handgun strapped to her waist. She handed a shotgun off to each of them. With those in hand they split up, the women in the station wagon, while the guys all got into the pick-up.

“Head shots only, guys. If you need to knock them back, go center mass, but headshots are the only thing that will put them down.” Alvin reiterated as they made it to the first mass of wrecked cars. They piled out of the truck, and Bill handed the keys to Betty. Alvin grabbed the first body, pulling it aside with the others helping out. All of them looked a little ill at handling the corpses.

They repeated the process, slowing down when Alvin moved working cars out of the pile of vehicles and off to the side. They cleared the first part of town quickly, since they’d already cleared the zombies from the area. Once they got past the part that Alvin and Bill had been through they slowed down, everyone keeping a careful eye out for zombies or other threats. Alvin checked each car they came to, to see if it was working or would need to be towed to the Scrapper eventually.

It wasn’t too much longer as they started to work their way through the businesses that dotted Main Street that zombies began to appear again. The group held back a little on the first few so Will and David could get used to the idea of shooting the undead. David missed the first couple of shots, obviously nervous.

“Damn it, David, I taught you better than that,” Will snapped at his son. “Either kill the fucking thing or go help the women.”

The next shot took the zombie square in the head, dropping it like a sack of potatoes. Will had killed the other two in that time.

"You can't do that if we come across the bigger groups," Alvin said, clapping David on the back. "But the first time is always the roughest. Hell, I puked after my first kill."

David gave him a slightly green sheepish smile, "I'm good."

"My son can do the job," Will growled at Alvin.

Alvin's hand twitched slightly towards his holstered gun as the older man's tone set off alarm bells in his head, tickling memories Alvin would much rather not be reminded of. "I'm sure he can," his voice cold as he replied.

"We'll split into three-man teams and clear each side of the street here." Bill cut in on the tense situation, "Go into each building and fire at least one round. Any zombies in there will come for you then. Kill them all, then drag the bodies to the door. As soon as we can find a fucking trailer we'll start loading." Bill looked at Frank and Will, "I'll take these two. Alvin, you got James and David."

Alvin shrugged, "Will do. How far do we want to bounce down the street before we stop?"

"Aim for Broadway for now, we can think about pushing to Cherry after that," Bill replied as he took his team across the street.

After two hours of killing zombies and dragging bodies, the two groups had reached Broadway. They hadn't encountered any real challenges, so they decided to push on to Cherry Street. It was behind the tavern they found a trailer for the rig. Alvin noticed that David hadn't missed another shot, but he was clearly unhappy.

"Alvin, go grab the rig and try to find a way back here to us," Bill ordered. "You can probably push through N150W."

“I’ll be back,” Alvin said as he took off at a jog.

“The rest of us will finish clearing out this section while we wait for him. Does anyone else know how to drive the rig, beside Alvin, Frank and me?” Bill asked, getting negative replies in return. “We’ll need to see about fixing that, if possible.”

Alvin had to vary his jog with walking as he found himself becoming winded as he went. “Need to improve my Hardiness for more health, and to not get winded so fast I guess,” he mumbled during one round of walking.

When he got nearer the truck, he saw that the looting group had moved off to the next street. He waved as he went by, getting return waves from the group and blown kiss from Becky. He got a ride from Betty back up to the compound to get the rig.

On the way to the tavern, he had to shove a few cars carefully out of the way, but he didn’t wreck the rig or cause it any major damage so he counted it as a win. Bill helped him maneuver into position for hook up. Once they had the trailer secured, they had a dilemma.

“Do we go back and grab the bodies we already piled up, or do we press on and load up the bodies last?” Alvin asked.

“I can drive the rig,” Frank spoke up. “Give me James and David to haul the corpses into the back and we should be good. You three can go on while we back and fill. We’ll catch up. Going to have to use the side streets, though. Main street is just too fucked to be used right now.”

“There’s an auto shop down the street, I’m hoping they still have their two tow trucks.” Bill stroked his mustache for a moment, “If they do, we might call it a day and start ferrying cars out as well.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” Alvin agreed.

With that in place the team split with David looking slightly ill at the idea of moving bodies again. Alvin shot a glance at Will, “Your son going to hold up?”

Will all but snarled, “He’ll be fine. He’s a little soft, but he adapts when I tell him to. Rebecca is probably already over whatever issues she might have had, but she’s useless for anything important.”

“Well, let’s get this show moving again,” Bill grunted as he took point. “We’ll push to Long Street and see if the shop has the trucks.”

Alvin felt his hackles rise as they started off again. He was really not liking Will the more he was around him. He was reminded of Frank Harris every time Will snapped at or about his children.

Another two dozen zombies later, they had cleared all the way down to the auto shop. There sat the two tow trucks, and after a quick search they found the keys in the main office. Alvin took one and Bill the other. Will rode with Bill.

They moved out, taking side streets back to the start of Main, waving to the women as they went by. They got back to Main just as James and David had finished with the first stack of bodies. Alvin backed the tow truck up to the first car and got out, leaving the truck idling.

“No more zombie killing today, we’re stacking bodies and hauling cars,” Bill announced as he got out of his truck.

James nodded, “It’s going to be a bit of work to get these cleared out. Where are we going to put them all?”

“We’ll use the parking lots on either side for now. Don’t need to hook them fancy, just enough to move them.” Alvin said as he set about hooking the first car to the tow truck.

“He’s right, we’re just going to hook and drag,” Bill added. “Alvin, why don’t you switch places with David? He and James can help me hook.

You and Will can go with Frank to get the next set of corpses."

"Body disposal," Alvin made a gagging motion as he walked past David. "You're relieved of this job, go help Bill."

David eagerly took off to help hook up cars to the tow trucks. Will watched his son with a pronounced frown before he followed Alvin.

The sun was setting by the time they had gotten all the current dead, including the ones from the first few side streets, into the trailer. Bill had managed to get a path cleared on Main up to where they had gotten with their zombie killing previously. The ladies had cleared all the easy loot from houses along the first two streets.

Tired, worn, and covered in blood Alvin jumped out of the tow truck. He was followed by James, Will, and David. All of them had more blood and gore on them then any of them had ever wanted. The women all stood back from them with various expressions of disgust. Frank only had a few small splotches on him and Bill had a touch more, but nothing like the other four. The women were all pristine for the most part, a bit of blood on their shoes, but that was it.

Frank waited for Alvin to unhook the trailer inside the Scrapper. Once it was done, he pulled the rig over next to the other vehicles before rejoining the group.

"Okay, we're going to give this its initial run and pray that it works for body disposal." Bill told them.

Susan nodded as she began to crank the door closed. While she did that, Frank secured the gate for the night. Once the Scrapper door was closed, she looked back at the group then pressed the big red button.

The Scrapper started humming with a vibration that rattled their chests slightly. The funnel on top began to send up a cloud of grey smoke. As it did that, small grey blocks about a foot square started to come out on the conveyor belt on the side.

Susan began to gather and stack them, the other women going over to help. As they worked, Susan called out over her shoulder, “You lot go shower. Once you’re clean again we’ll do dinner, then we’ll see about what we can do with all this scrap.”

Alvin grinned as he headed off for the door before the others could, “Yes, ma’am.”

Bill chuckled as he followed Alvin, “I notice you always seem agreeable when it comes to what Susan suggests?”

Alvin opened the door to the bunker and pulled off his boots, jacket, shirt and pants which left him standing there in just his boxers and socks. “Who wouldn’t be? She can talk like a drill sergeant, but she looks like a wet dream.”

Bill shook his head, frowning, as he took off his boots. He pushed Alvin inside. “No free shows. Get moving, there are women out here.”

Will nodded as he stripped and followed Frank, who only had to remove his boots. “My daughter doesn’t need any peeks.”

David and James were last and hurried after the others. The women had all managed discreet glances while the men were stripping. When the men went inside they spent a few minutes comparing what they’d seen, and rating them in order of preference.

James was the clear winner. Surprisingly, David was second even though they knew he was barely legal, followed by Will and with Alvin coming in dead last. Only Becky made any comments expressing interest in him.

“Why Alvin?” Susan asked her.

“Are you kidding? He saved my life at school. He’s a hero to my eyes. Besides, he won’t be turning me down.” Her lips quirked up as she

said the last.

Bridget snorted, “Took him for a test drive already?”

“Just a short turn around the block. Not enough time for a full workout,” Becky chuckled. “I did get a good feel for what he’s packing, and while it isn’t a bat, it isn’t far off.”

A round of laughter followed her announcement, and the others all offered ideas about how to get time alone with him and not tip off her father. Becky grinned, knowing she would have Alvin to herself without any competition from the nurses or Susan.

Alvin was the first out of the shower, he darted back to the room he shared, with only a towel around his waist. His clothes were in the room already. He got dressed carefully before he sat down and returned to his cell.

“Welcome back,” Jarvis’s voice greeted him.

Alvin looked down to find his clothing cleaned, “I love that effect.”

“The development team is thinking of changing it so that clothes only clean themselves once a day, at midnight unless upgraded,” Jarvis informed Alvin, “so don’t get too used to it.”

“Well, fuck. Guess I’ll need a second outfit then,” Alvin sighed.

“Are you just stopping by to clean up?”

“Basically. Got dinner first, then we’re going to see about building more stuff.”

“That was an interesting idea for destroying the bodies,” Jarvis commented. “None of the others have thought of that yet.”

“Well, we could have piled them all into a house and burned it down, but that just didn’t seem as effective,” Alvin replied.

“That is what the few who have thought about getting rid of the bodies have done,” Jarvis added.

“What about the others?”

“I can’t comment on that,” Jarvis added. “You should check the store before you go. There are a few new options.”

Alvin pulled up the summary report to check his total.

World Mode Summary
Total Experience Earned: 6,625 XP
Breakdown: 1 day in World 2,000 XP, Settler bonus 3,000 XP, Walkers killed 625 XP, Viewer bonus 1,000 XP

“Darn. I was really hoping for more,” Alvin sighed.

“Your bonus for the settlement has distorted your idea of what the XP return should be. That is a decent amount of XP, especially considering how easy it is for you right now.”

“Yeah, I keep waiting for the penny to drop and something horrible to come after us,” Alvin replied as he opened the store and browsed through the options. “Hey, what’s this Holographic AI option?”

“I’m glad you asked,” Jarvis replied, the smirk evident in his voice. “It allows your AI, which would be me, to appear as a hologram in any Settlement that you have opened up. The real bonus is that you can then use me to connect to the store without having to come back here.”

Alvin looked at the price and shook his head, “Gonna be awhile, then. That costs fifty grand, so yeah, not anytime soon.”

Hologram AI: Cost 50,000 XP

Allows your helpful AI to appear as a hologram in any Settlement you have started. Can be used to send messages between settlements. Acts as a store for any person who interacts with the AI. (Butler to go, at your service.)

“You know it is there now, though, so you can budget accordingly since you’ve finished upgrading guns for Bill.”

“True,” Alvin replied as he scanned further down the list. “Oh, for fifty grand I can get the Power to ID items out in World Mode.”

“True, but if you got my hologram form then…” Jarvis cut off. “That information is not relevant at this time,” came the robotic voice.

“Ugh, that sucks,” Alvin told Jarvis. “I think I understand, though. Have you been the one IDing items for me when I bring them back here?”

“That is correct,” Jarvis mumbled, clearly upset at having triggered the subroutine again.

“Yep, you’re right, that gives me something to save for,” Alvin told his pseudo-friend. “I do need to grab an emergency medkit while I’m here. Seems like a good idea to keep one on hand.”

“Understood. I wish you well in your continued endeavors.”

“Thanks, Jarvis. See you next time,” Alvin replied before he vanished.

Alvin got up off the floor, looking down at his clean clothes with a grin before he went out to see where everyone was. James nodded as he went by into the room, his hair still damp and a towel around his waist. Alvin grinned as he shut the door behind him.

Bill and Frank had just washed hands and faces besides changing clothes. Will was standing off to the side out of the way covered by a blanket, which meant that David was in the shower. Becky was sitting on

the ground next to Teresa, listening to the tale of how Alvin had saved the elderly lady.

“Speaking of, there he is now,” Teresa added with a kindly smile. “How did you get those cleaned so fast?”

Alvin grinned, “A bug that the people in charge are ‘fixing’. That means I’m going to have to see about getting another set of clothes soon.”

“Everyone should have extra sets,” Will said from the side. “My family all has extra clothing already.”

“We can have the clothes set aside from all the other stuff, it shouldn’t take long to get plenty to go around,” Bill commented.

“The nurses all found extra sets for them today. Well, once they got over the hang up of wearing dead people’s clothes,” Becky added.

Alvin’s mind wandered for a second, imagining all the women trying on clothes, and taking them off again. Becky snorted as she watched him. “What?” he asked a little defensively.

“It was kind of obvious where your mind was,” Becky laughed.

He shrugged, “I’m a man and still alive, so yeah.”

Will’s teeth grated together as he snarled, “My daughter is still a child.”

“I’m a woman,” Becky snapped at her father, getting to her feet. “I’m eighteen. I’m not a little girl anymore.”

“Rebecca Woodrow,” Will snarled, “you will keep a civil tongue in your head, or so help me…” he cut off as the bathroom door opened.

David darted out of the bathroom covered in only a towel. Alvin saw two heads poking out of the kitchen as David rushed into the men’s

bedroom.

Bill chuckled, “Ladies, if you don’t mind.”

Bridgett smiled at him, “We were just seeing if that was the last of you.”

Will’s brow furrowed, “I’ll get going then so we can eat.” He went into the bathroom, ignoring his still fuming daughter.

After he was in there for a minute, Becky walked off to the kitchen. “I’ll go help out in here.”

Bill glanced at Frank, who was shaking his head, “You think he’s going to be a problem?”

“I wouldn’t doubt it,” Frank replied with a sigh.

“I think the women are starting to figure out which of us they prefer,” Alvin muttered as he considered the scene a moment ago. He was trying to not react to Will’s obvious abusive tendencies that were pushing at his buttons.

“Of course they are,” Theresa added from her chair. “Death is something that hangs over all of us right now. Can’t blame them for thinking of comfort at a time like this.”

Alvin snorted, “True that, Gran.”

“It’s not like any one here is averse to the idea of cuddling with someone at night to reinforce the feeling of safety.” Terry added with a small smile.

Bill grunted, “Not sure I like the idea of Susan cuddling anyone.”

James came into the main room at that point, freezing as his face went red, “Err...”

Everyone broke into laughter except Bill and James, who just looked at each other for a minute. Bill shook his head, “Well, fine then, maybe if we get this place expanded I won’t complain as much.”

James coughed as he looked away, “I haven’t…”

“Dinner,” Susan called from the kitchen, much to James’s evident relief.

Chapter Nineteen

Dinner turned out to be beef stew, as Susan was using up as much of her currently perishable food as possible. As they ate, Alvin asked her for a rundown of her day, with giving the production buildings samples of things.

“All the buildings took everything I could get them samples of. I can’t start any of the production, only the Settlement Owner or the Overseer can,” she told him between bites. “I could see how long it would take to get something produced, though. For instance, in the butcher shop, ground beef currently takes a full day to produce three pounds. If I wanted Filet instead, that goes up to two weeks. The ore processor will give us a five pound bar of copper in a day, or titanium in two weeks.”

Alvin noted all of the frowns around the table except for David, who nodded. “It’s kind of like an RTS. It’s about base management to a degree. What’s the scrap used for?”

“The little bit I could find says it’ll speed up the production buildings,” Alvin replied after swallowing. “Susan, how many blocks of scrap did we end up with?”

“A bit over twenty,” she sipped at her drink. “It looked to be about one block per square foot of trash that we put in.”

“Okay. After dinner I’ll go check how the scrap can speed up production time. I also need to see about upgrading the living arrangements. This bunker is going to be a bit crowded tonight, and it’ll only get worse if other people show up.”

“Are you going to appoint an Overseer?” Susan asked, taking another bite.

“I’ll see what the table can tell me,” Alvin replied. Alvin glanced down the table just in time to see David’s eyes widen as he stared at Bridget, who was sitting next to him. Alvin hid his smirk as he figured out what Bridget was probably doing. Shaking his head, he took another bite just as a hand stroked his thigh gently. He managed to swallow without choking and looked at Becky. She wasn’t looking at him, though her hand did stay on his leg. His eyes flicked to Will, who was eyeing his son with a severe frown.

Alvin finished his meal first, gently disengaging Becky’s hand surreptitiously from his leg before he stood. “I’ll put this in the kitchen. If anyone wants to know more, feel free to join me outside.” He dropped his bowl off in the kitchen and was going back through the dining room as Becky stood up with her own empty bowl. He didn’t look at her as he went past Will, who was watching him with narrowed eyes.

Out in the yard, Alvin picked up a block of scrap for each building, shoving five of them into his fanny pack, as they thankfully stacked. He walked to the quarry first, as it was the closest production structure. The quarry was a five-foot diameter pit with a small table just outside the roped off area. Touching the table, Alvin found he could make several types of stone, one of which was concrete. He started that producing, which was going to take a full day. As soon as the clock started ticking down, he put a block of scrap on the small table. He got a pop-up asking if he wanted to speed up production. Accepting it, the scrap vanished and 144 minutes vanished from the clock. Alvin did some quick math and nodded, 10% of the production time went away. He dropped a second block on the table and another 144 minutes was removed from the production timer. That led him to believe that each block of scrap was worth 10% of the overall time, not time left to go.

He went to the lumber mill next and set it for pine, which would again take a day. The block of scrap took away the same 144 minutes as it had with the quarry. The butcher shop was next. It was already producing chicken from his earlier poking around with it. A block of scrap took away the same amount of time as it had at the other buildings. Next up was the chemical plant. There he found they could make a very wide variety of

items, including fuel and plastic. He set it for pure isopropyl alcohol, which would take eight hours. The block of scrap took away 48 minutes out of the 480 minutes required to make it.

“What have you found out?” Becky asked as she came up behind him.

He replied without turning around, “That this is going to be interesting. The scrap takes a flat 10% off the total production time of whatever is being made.”

“Rebecca?” Will’s voice came from the yard.

Becky rolled her eyes, muttering under her breath, “Fucking Christ, Dad, just leave me alone.”

“He always this bad?” Alvin asked quietly.

“Yes, but he’s gotten worse ever since mom left him,” Becky replied before she raised her voice. “In here,” she stepped out of the building, which was illuminated by a single bare bulb in the ceiling.

Alvin followed her out, holding a block of scrap in each hand, so maybe Will wouldn’t jump to conclusions. “Finishing up in the buildings. Why don’t you fill him in on what I told you, Gothy?”

“Her name is Rebecca, not Gothy,” Will barked. “Go back inside the house, Rebecca.”

“No,” Becky said simply as she walked off towards the next building. “I want to know what our new home is all about.”

“This isn’t our home, Rebecca,” Will snapped at his daughter, his voice louder than necessary, as he stepped in front of her.

“It can be if she wants it to be,” Alvin said as he went by the father and daughter. “Every survivor who doesn’t cause problems will be welcome

here.”

“Stay out of this, this is a family matter,” Will hissed at Alvin.

“Fuck you, Dad,” She snapped at him. “I’m going to stay here. Alvin there saved me and David at the school. You were at home packing, as if that was more important than your children.” Her voice rose and her hands planted on her hips. “Which is about what I would expect from you, anyway. You always do think of yourself over your children.”

Will’s hands twitched as he took a step closer to his daughter, “You will give me the respect I am due, Rebecca, or so help me god…”

“Or what? You’ll beat me again, but maybe worse this time like you used to mom?” Becky spat at him even as she stepped backwards. “You never cared about us as it was, and we would rather have gone with her. If the judge hadn’t been your drinking buddy, she would have won custody of us.”

Will raised his hand as he stepped forward, “I’ll teach you respect, you disrespectful little bitch.”

“What in the fuck…” Bill began to say as he rounded the corner of the bunker, taking in the scene.

He was cut off by the single gunshot that hit the ground next to Will. Alvin spoke in a cold anger, his voice strangled with the emotion. “If you so much as lay a single finger on her or your son, so help me, I will put a bullet through your empty skull.”

Will spun on Alvin, spitting the words out with a snarl. “I told you to stay out of this. You only want to fuck her, it’s not like you care about her. She’ll end up a whore, just like her mother. Her and my useless son, utter disappointments the both of them.”

“You should be leaving,” Bill told Will in a calm tone, but his hand rested on his own 1911.

“Don’t,” Becky said to them, her hands held out pleadingly as she stepped forward, towards her father’s back. “I’m sorry, Dad, but calm down, okay?”

When Becky reached out and touched Will’s shoulder he spun. His hand caught the side of her face, the slap sounding like a gunshot.

Two shots rang out in quick succession. One took Will in the back, punching through his heart. The other one went right through his head, removing his deranged mind from his body. As Will collapsed, other people came around the corner to find both Alvin and Bill holding their guns.

“Dad!” David yelled as he rushed forward to check his father, only to find a dead body. He met Becky’s eyes as she lay on the ground, one hand held to her discolored cheek. “He hit you?”

Becky nodded, her words slightly slurred due to her injured jaw, “They warned him not to. He slapped me just like he used to do to mom.” She wiped at some of the gore that covered her, her eyes full of a perverse joy briefly before they became blank.

David looked at his dead father, tears spilling from his eyes. “You stupid son of a bitch…” he sobbed. Reaching for Becky and pulling her into a tight hug, the blood and brain that covered her squishing between them. “Fuck. Now what do we do?”

Alvin holstered his gun as he watched the siblings, glad that another abusive fuck had died. “You can both stay here as long as you follow the simple rules that Bill puts in place. I’m sorry this happened, but I will not stand by while people are abused.” He walked away, his face devoid of emotion.

Alvin didn’t hear what happened next as he walked away. He went over to the Draftsman table and brought up the interface. The Overseer position turned out to be in the job section of the interface. He tapped it to

pull up what information he could about it. He was only vaguely aware of people moving past him as he worked at the interface.

Overseer: The job of the Overseer is to oversee day to day operations in the Settlement. (Go figure.) The Overseer is granted access to the production buildings and the Draftsman table. The Overseer is able to assign jobs to other settlers, as well as building new structures and upgrading existing ones. The Overseer also has the authority to establish diplomatic relations with other Settlements and to set up trade caravans.

Alvin didn't need to think about it as he tapped the job then slotted Susan into it. She had been the most levelheaded of all of the people he had met to this point, and it was her house that the Settlement was based on. After he assigned her, he looked the options open to him with the current Settlement XP. The total currently sat at 30,000, which would allow him to expand the current bunker, set up a new housing structure, or build various buildings like a medical facility or an inn. The walls could be changed, or expanded to gain more ground inside of them, all at varying costs.

He pushed the walls out, sliding the processing buildings out as well to keep them on the outskirts. When he finished that, he built an inn with a dozen rooms. It contained a large kitchen and a big common area, as well. He added two extra rooms to the Bunker, along with another bathroom, to give them more room.

The inn said it needed a person to run it. The job was obviously called Innkeeper. He put Terry into that position. Before he stopped, he noticed all of the projects had time listed for them to complete but none of them were ticking down. Frowning, he checked the table more and found they needed a Builder. He assigned David to that spot and the timer began to slowly tick down on the walls.

He added up all the time required, sighing as he saw that it was going to take a week for all of the projects to finish. That would be less than optimal. He played around with the table some more and learned that the time for building projects could be reduced by using items produced by the

other buildings. The amount of the time reduction would depend on whether they used raw materials or finished materials.

A single copper bar would reduce the time needed to build the inn by a quarter of an hour, but a copper pipe would knock it down by a full hour. But it had to be a copper pipe produced by a metal worker, which meant he would need a Smithy. Shaking his head, he closed the interface, “Well, it’s going to be a long project.”

“It is our life now,” Susan chimed in softly from behind him.

Alvin turned to her, “True enough, shitty as that might be. People like Will are going to end up more and more common. I can’t let that kind of issue go on. Abusers deserve a special place in hell. That is one thing I can’t look past.”

Susan met his cold eyes, she swallowed at the obvious lack of remorse he felt for killing another man. “Any other things we should be aware of, then?” Her voice was calm.

“Not that I can think of.”

“James is going to start playing, will you be joining us?”

Alvin shook his head, “I’m going to shut myself into the chemical plant and see if that will get me back to my cell. You’re the Overseer now. David will be working on expanding the compound for the next week and Gran will be in charge of the Inn when it’s built. A dozen rooms should help alleviate the sleeping arrangements. The table will tell you everything now that you have full access.”

Susan gave him a small smile, “I don’t blame you for what you did, just so you know. David and Becky just told me some of what they’ve dealt with. Why me as Overseer?”

“You’ve been the most levelheaded person so far,” he shrugged. “No other reason. Go ahead and enjoy your boyfriend’s music.”

Susan’s lips ticked up slightly as he called James her boyfriend, “Thank you, Alvin. You helped us get out of the hospital, you made this growing Settlement possible, and you’re willing to do more.”

His lips turned up ever so slightly as he felt a brief wash of emotion, before it faded away. “You’re welcome.” He walked away as he felt the ice start to crack over his emotional core. He shut himself into the building and sat down as he considered what he was.

“A killer. Cold hearted, ruthless and pragmatic,” he whispered to himself as he waited for the light to take him back to his cell.

“Welcome home, sir,” Jarvis greeted him. “Things look like they have gotten complicated.”

“Life always is, Jarvis,” Alvin replied as he used the facilities. “Just going to get some sleep before going back in. Wake me at six in the morning.”

“Of course, sir,” Jarvis replied as the lights dimmed.

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Waking on his own Alvin stretched as he sat up. “Time?”

“It is a few minutes before six, sir.”

“Okay,” Alvin got dressed, used the bathroom and bought a regrowth kit. “I want to make sure I remember this right, the regrowth kit replaces any damaged body part, except the head and torso?”

“Correct, sir,” Jarvis replied crisply. “It cost 2000 XP, but that is worth the cost of an arm or leg we think.”

“The Healing Potion for 5k though, it heals the entire body while also regrowing all limbs except the head?”

“That is correct,” Jarvis answered.

“Well, a medkit and regrowth kit seem like a good compromise for now. I’ll be back later Jarvis. I plan to stay here every night, at least until the inn is built.” He purchased the items he wanted.

“Very well, sir,” Jarvis intoned. “Please don’t forget to save up for the AI Hologram Power.”

“I know, Jarvis,” Alvin grunted as he hit the enter world button.

He appeared in the chemical plant and walked over to the bunker door. When he reached the main room, almost everyone else in the Settlement was there. They stared at him as he entered. “Is there a problem?”

“Are you going to kill us?” Barbara asked, her voice trembling slightly.

“Are you going to abuse someone?”

“Of course not.”

“Then you should be safe.” He turned to Gran, “Any idea how long until breakfast is ready?”

“Another minute or two,” Terry told him as she rocked in her chair. “How are you holding up?”

“Fine,” he looked around the room, not seeing David or Becky. “How are they doing?”

Bill walked in from the dining room, “Becky is helping Susan in the kitchen. David just woke up a minute ago. They’re both coping. Better than I had expected, actually.”

“Good,” Alvin leaned against the wall. His eyes closed before he spoke again, “If you could all stop looking at me like I’m a rabid animal, that would be nice.”

“We just don’t know what you might do next,” Betty added. “It makes us uneasy.”

Sighing, Alvin shook his head, “Look, unless you’re going to abuse someone or try to kill someone inside the compound, you’re safe. I don’t just kill people at random, so stop it.” The words came out cold, devoid of any emotional warmth that would normally be in a person’s voice.

“Food is up,” Becky called from the doorway, her words still a little slurred due to her damaged jaw.

Alvin opened his eyes to look at Becky. She was watching him. He couldn’t read her expression, but she stepped out into the main room as the others went by her. Once it was just the two of them she came over to stand before him, her eyes searching his face.

“Why did you do it?” she asked as she met his gaze.

Lips turning down, he gritted his teeth for a second before he told her. “I was an abused child. I can’t let another person end up like I did. I killed my abuser at the age of eight. It took them a while to find out that I was just a victim. I warned him, but when he hit you I reacted.”

She kept her eyes on his, “You saved me and David once before. When he turned on me, you reacted to save me again.” She licked her lips as they quivered slightly, “You have been my hero twice now.”

He met her conflicted gaze with his mostly emotionless one. “I’m no hero, Gothy. I’m a very flawed person, deeply scarred and broken.”

“We all are to some degree,” she said as she leaned into him. “Will you hold me for a minute?”

He put his arms around her, pulling her into an embrace. He could feel her heart beating in time with his. “You will be safe here,” he told her.

“If you’re here, then I’ll feel safe,” she murmured into his chest.

“Eventually I’ll be going out into the world. I need to find others and see what else is happening out there.”

“I’ll go with you,” she pulled back and looked up at him. Her gaze was determined but tinged with worry.

“That might not be a good idea,” he started.

“She shoots better than me, is smarter than me and will not flinch from what needs doing,” David interrupted them. “I don’t like the fact you killed our father, but it needed to be done.” David paused as if saying the words hurt him some. “If she wants to go with you, then you should actually consider it and not turn her away.” Not waiting for a response, David walked into the dining room.

“I’ll prove I can be your equal,” Becky told him as she took a half step back which still kept her in his arms. “Give me a chance to prove it?”

Alvin met her determined gaze, measuring her against what he expected to come. “You’re with me today when we go out. We shall see if you can keep up. But first, use this,” he handed her the medkit for her discolored jaw.

She applied the medkit to her jaw, her eyes blazing with joy as she leaned in to capture his lips with hers. He accepted her kiss, returning the passion behind it, until she pulled away. “I’ll show you how well we mesh, today and tonight.” With those words, she walked into the dining room, leaving him there.

Taking a moment to adjust his pants, as well as clear his mind, Alvin laughed once. He had been right, she was crazy. Still, if she could do what

she claimed then it would be nice to have a companion. Shaking his head, he headed into the dining room to get some food.

Chapter Twenty

Breakfast was scrambled eggs and bacon and it disappeared quickly. Alvin was the last one to the table, and ended up with the last two unwanted, charred pieces of bacon. He didn't mind, he was used to burnt bacon having made it that way himself a lot when he'd been learning to cook. As each person finished, they excused themselves from the table to get things ready for another day of scrapping in Green River.

Becky ate quickly, excusing herself as well. Alvin watched her go, her swaying skirt catching his eyes as he thought of how impractical it would be for what they were going to be doing today. As he went back to eating, David sat back down at the table. Alvin crunched a piece of nearly-black bacon as he raised a brow at David. "Question?"

"Susan tells me I'll be building things. I've never built anything outside of bombs or chem experiments. I was hoping you could tell me more."

"No idea," Alvin replied as he took a sip of coffee to clear his throat. "For the buildings to be upgraded or built it requires someone to do the job of Builder. I picked you, to give you a day or two to process the events of yesterday. Head on outside with Susan, maybe she can get more out of the table as an explanation."

"You didn't check last night?"

"I wasn't in the best place last night," Alvin shrugged. "All I really know is that the walls are first on the list, followed by the two rooms for the bunker, and finally the Inn."

Sighing, David got to his feet, "Okay. I hope I don't fuck this up."

“You can’t,” Alvin replied, picking up his last bit of bacon. “Anyone can do it correctly, it just takes a body.”

Frowning, David nodded and left the room. Alvin finished his food and took the plate into the kitchen, setting it with the others in the sink. He drained his coffee cup, setting it next to the others before heading out. Becky was standing in the main room when he came back in. Her usual black skirt and blouse were gone, in their place was a pair of jeans and a tee-shirt. He read the text on the shirt and his lips quirked up.

“Your dad must have hated that shirt,” Alvin told her.

Becky ran her hand down the shirt, her fingers brushing the lettering, ‘How many licks does it take to get to the center?’ with an arrow pointing down. “He didn’t take it well when I bought this or any of the others. He didn’t like anything I did. He barely cared for anything David did. He was only happy when David was helping him test new bombs.”

“We’ll be clearing town, so go grab the shotgun your father was using yesterday,” Alvin told her, watching her go back down the hall. His eyes tracked down far enough to see the thick hiking boots she was wearing. He pursed his lips as he considered this practical side he was seeing at the moment. By the time she came back, Alvin was back to being impassive.

When they exited the bunker finally, David was at one of the walls tapping it with a hammer. Alvin watched him, shaking his head but knowing David must be following prompts from the game. Bill and James were talking near one of the vehicles as Alvin and Becky approached. “We good?”

“We’re only waiting on you,” Frank told him. Bill was telling James something, his voice low and his face intent. “Bill and James are going to be a team, you and Becky are the other team. I’ll be with the women, guarding them as they load up the truck and the small tow-along trailer we found last night. I think you and Bill are taking the tow trucks down to clear

the road, and if you find another trailer we'll get someone to bring the rig around."

"Works for me," Alvin told Frank as he headed over to one of the tow trucks. He glanced at James, who was nodding at whatever Bill was telling him. "I wonder what that's all about?"

"Susan told Bill this morning that she would be sharing a room with James as soon as the inn was up." Becky told him as they climbed into the tow truck. "You going to teach me things today?" Her tone was innocent, but her eyes sparkled with mischief.

Alvin pursed his lips, "While we're working, you need to keep your mind focused on the task at hand." He watched her lips turn down slightly before he continued, "Later, I'm sure we can exchange notes."

Her lips quirked back up, "I hope so. I never did get my thank you for yesterday."

Alvin started the truck and considered her seeming lack of empathy for her dead father. He wasn't much better though, he didn't feel anything over the act, either. He considered it again and he knew it wasn't true. A part of him did feel some emotion over shooting Will. The darkest part of him felt happy at being able to kill another abusive prick. Alvin looked in the mirrors, making sure the others were behind him as he drove into town.

He noted the truck turning off where the scrapping team had left off yesterday. Pulling his eyes back to the road, Alvin led the way to the pile up on Main so they could start their day. He left it idling as he got out, followed by Becky.

"Okay, Gothy, watch what I do," he told her as he grabbed the chains, releasing the catch on them to pull them to the first car. He hooked the first car, getting back to his feet. As he did two quick blasts rang out from Becky's shotgun. Alvin drew his gun, scanning for other threats as he went to her side. He looked at the thing she had just killed, puzzled by what he was seeing. "What the hell was it?"

Becky kept scanning the nearby buildings, “Mostly dog-like, but nothing I’ve seen before.”

Bill and James joined them as she replied to him. “Did you see more?” Bill asked, his Thompson held ready.

“No.” She lowered the gun slightly. “Just the one, and it was hard to see until it left the shadow of the building as it came onto the road.”

Alvin stepped towards the body slowly, his gun up ready to fire. The body didn’t twitch and blood was coming from the two wounds on it. Kneeling, he grabbed it by the ruff. When it didn’t move or seem to breathe he tilted the head to get a better look. It was dog-like, but definitely not a normal dog. The lips were pulled back, revealing multiple rows of shark-like teeth. The jaw was larger than he would expect on something that otherwise looked like a Labrador, to accommodate all the teeth. There was a collar around the thing’s neck. Shemp was the name on the tag, along with a number. Alvin pulled the collar off and took it over to Bill. “Any idea?”

Bill looked at it, then began to nod, “Gregor’s dog is named Shemp. He runs an outdoor adventure place up near the river on the north side.”

“Well, that isn’t a normal dog,” Alvin told him, describing the differences. Bill and James went over to see for themselves.

Bill came back with a frown, “That is Shemp. It has a scar on the left back leg that I remember him getting as a pup.”

Alvin pursed his lips, recalling having seen Shemp before, “I think I caught a glimpse of it when I got the doc his car. I shot at a black shape that had been chewing on the bodies.”

“We should go check on Gregor,” Bill added after a second.

“Just turn north from here?” Alvin asked as he went towards the trucks.

“Down a street then north will work,” Bill replied, following. “Let’s clear the wrecks that way as we go.”

They spent next hour dragging cars. Becky stood on watch, perched on the back of Alvin’s truck where she could see in all directions. Bill and Alvin each stayed in their trucks, James hooking cars up to each one in turn and unhooking them as they were dragged aside. James rode on the back of Bill’s truck between groups of vehicles. Once they had gotten to the street Bill wanted they turned north, clearing the few cars on the road before them as they went. It was down that road that they found zombies again.

Alvin put the truck in park, jumping out to kill some of them, when he noticed the changes to the zombies. A dozen of them were coming forward, but now they were moving a little faster and most of them were carrying debris as weapons. “I think they’re evolving or something,” he told the others as they came abreast of him.

“Not the best news,” Bill spat as he shouldered his gun.

“Take them down before they get too close.” All four opened fire, mowing down the group of zombies in short order. “This is not making me happy,” Alvin said as the echoes died away. “Zombies that use weapons do not make me happy. Mutated shark dogs, do not make me happy.”

“We may have to reevaluate the threat level,” Bill grunted as he stretched his shoulder that had been taking abuse from the Tommy gun.

“Should we turn back?” Becky asked as she flicked the safety of the shotgun on to reload it.

“No, we still need to check on Gregor,” Bill replied.

Alvin nodded as he handed a medkit to Bill, “Fix your shoulder, then we’ll go.”

Bill nodded his thanks, applying the medkit to his shoulder. “Now that is just downright strange. Never encountered any drug that makes pain go away that fast. I could get used to that.”

“It’s the way the world is now,” Alvin said as they went back to their trucks.

After a few more blocks, they came to a large parcel enclosed with chain link fence. The sign for Colorado Expeditions was slung on the fence near the gate, which was open and off its track. They drove into the yard. noting the zombie corpses littering the ground. They parked a few feet from the door. Bill got out first, “Gregor, you in there?”

The curtain on the second story twitched aside a few inches, “Bill?”

“Glad you’re alive, Gregor. Anyone with you?”

“I got nine plus me and the wife,” Gregor called back. “The zombies have been acting strange today. You seen any yet today?”

“Killed a dozen of them on the way up. Come on down here so we can talk.”

“Have you seen Shemp?” Gregor asked as he opened the front door and stepped out. Several people could be seen in the room beyond him, all of them watching the newcomers warily.

Bill pulled the collar from his pocket, “We found him.”

Two guys with rifles stepped out onto the porch, taking up stations to either side of Gregor. Both of them looked hopeful at seeing other people. A woman came rushing out to Bill, a short Hispanic woman with graying hair. She paused as she took the collar and wiped at her eyes. “The zombies?” she asked in a thick accent.

Alvin, James and Becky joined the group on the porch while Bill considered how to tell her. Alvin, seeing his indecision, spoke up. “No. He

was shot when he came after us. He wasn't normal anymore."

The woman jerked back as if he'd slapped her and began to speak in rapid Spanish, her eyes wide with anger and sadness. Gregor put his arm around his wife, then looked at Alvin with narrowed eyes. "Bill, what is he saying?"

"Shemp, mutated somehow, Gregor. His mouth was broader and full of sharp triangular teeth. He blended into the shadows like he was part of them until he stepped into the sun."

Gregor didn't seem to want to believe them until James spoke up, "We can take you back to the body."

Nodding, Gregor turned back to the others, "Stay here, I'll be back."

"Alvin, you wait here with James," Bill said as he motioned Gregor into the truck.

"Roger," Alvin replied. "We'll be waiting."

Half an hour later Bill drove back into the yard. Gregor got out, retrieving the dead body of Shemp from the back of the tow truck. He carried it over to the side of the house, setting it down gently and grabbed the shovel that was nearby. His wife ran out, kneeling beside the dead dog, crying as she talked to her husband in Spanish. He said only a few words back to her in a terse tone, pointing at the body. At that point she finally looked at the body and gasped out an expletive aimed at god.

Alvin walked over, picking up another shovel. He began helping dig the grave Gregor was working on. Gregor looked up at him before giving a single nod of thanks. The other people inside the house came out to find out what was going on. Gregor's wife got to her feet with one last glance back at Shemp's body before she went back inside. A moment after that, Bill spoke up to the group.

“Folks, my name is Bill Hankok. My place is a few miles outside of town. We’ve started to build a Settlement there. We’ve been cleaning up the town as much as we can and doing our best to make it a bit safer around here. I’m extending an offer for you all to come with us.”

Gregor paused in digging to speak up, “I suggest we all go with him. He was telling me about how they’re fixing his place up to be able to better help more people. Unless you would rather try to hold this place or go find something else. The wife and I will be going with Bill, after I bury Shemp.”

Alvin kept digging, “If you want to go start getting ready, I’ll get this done and have it waiting for you.” Alvin looked over at Bill, “Have them bring the truck over so we can load up as much as we can from here. The station wagon, too.”

Becky took the shovel from Gregor, “I’ll help Alvin. James and Bill can take the tow trucks and bring the other vehicles back.”

Everyone agreed with the plan. The others from the Expeditions building went inside to grab their meager belongings while Gregor and Bill left in one truck, James in the other. Alvin and Becky dug the grave a good three feet deep before calling it done, right as Bill and James came rolling into the yard. Bill was in the rig, with a flatbed trailer they’d found. James was driving the station wagon. Alvin’s hands were aching as he and Becky set the shovels aside. Gregor’s wife brought them a pitcher of water and cups.

“Thank you, ma’am,” Alvin told her as he poured Becky a cup then one for himself. He downed the first cup quickly some of it splashing down his chest. Becky drained her cup almost as quickly. He poured again for them as they sat on the bench under the awning of the porch while everyone else started hauling things out of the house. Becky sipped at her third cup of water, her face contorted slightly with pain. “Problem?” Alvin asked her.

“Feet are starting to hurt, been awhile since I had to put my boots on,” she said before looking at her hands, “also a few small blisters.”

Alvin looked at his own hands, noting two blisters forming, "Blisters suck, but not going to use my medkits on them. Your feet are another issue. Are the boots tight?"

"No, they just aren't as comfortable as my normal shoes. A day or two and I'll be used to them again. Before the divorce we would do camping trips as a family. Boots were mandatory for those trips, after a day my feet would adjust. That was when we were small kids, we didn't know he was beating her then."

"That was the first time he hit you?" Alvin asked.

"First time he slapped me around others. He was always big on corporal punishment when we were kids. He would spank us a lot, sometimes it would leave bruises, but we didn't know any better at the time. It might also explain a few of my peculiarities." She frowned for a moment before shaking her head. "He would beat mom blue, just short of her having to go to the hospital, which she never did out of fear. She finally decided to leave. She took her stuff and moved out while we were at school and dad was at work. She left town, then filed for divorce. She said she was afraid he would stop her if she tried to take us with her. When he slapped me last night, all I could see was mom, bloodied and laying on the floor sobbing." Her hands shook as she finished speaking, she leaned against him, "You won't hit me like that, will you?"

Alvin felt a surge of something he couldn't understand as he put his arm around her. "I won't hit you unless you ask me to."

Her lips quirked up a fraction, "So you will do that if I ask? Good to know." She looked up at him, "When are you planning on heading out into the world?"

"Not until I know they can survive, to give me a place to come back to," he said as he watched people loading up the flatbed with boxes. "Not even sure where I'll go, yet, when I do head out."

"Do you think the zombies and animals are going to change more?"

“I would almost guarantee it,” Alvin sighed.

Bill came over to them, “You two okay?”

“Tired from the manual labor, haven’t dug a ditch in a while,” Alvin replied.

“We’re calling off the rest of the scrapping for the day. The others are heading back to drop off what they got done. Once we get back to the compound, we’ll see about getting the new people adjusted and fitted in somewhere. The twelve room inn isn’t going to be enough.”

“Some of them are couples,” James added as he joined them. “So we still might have enough room. We can always expand the inn, right?”

“Yes,” Alvin said. “It takes Settlement XP. I’ll have to see what we got today and for what reasons.”

“Another hour before they’re ready,” Bill told him. “After they have everything loaded, Gregor will bury Shemp and then we can go.”

“Works,” Alvin replied as he took another sip. He caught a look on James’s face and tried to puzzle out what it meant. He realized he still had his arm around Becky and she was leaning into him as they sat there, his hand right over one of her breasts. He looked down at Becky to find her grinning up at him, “Oh, you devious little…” Her laughter drowned out the rest of his remark.

Becky was still laughing as she sat up, his arm slipping from her. “Took you long enough.”

“We’re ready,” Gregor told them as he came out of the house for the last time. “We tied down the boxes to the trailer. Just need to bury my buddy.”

Everyone gathered around the hole where Gregor was gently laying Shemp down. Climbing back out, he took a moment before he began to speak. “Shemp was like a child to me and Venessa, all of our dogs have been. He was a vibrant, youthful and eager companion on our trips.” He shared a couple of stories of adventures they’d shared with the dog before winding down. “We lay him to rest now, sad that he is gone, but happy that he will no longer have to fear this world.” With that he picked up the shovel and began to fill the hole.

Venessa, his wife, stood there crying as Gregor filled the hole in with help from Bill. Once they had it filled, Gregor laid a simple stone slab over the top. He took Venessa under his arm and led her to the station wagon. The women were in the car. The men sat on the trailer, each of them armed and keeping their eyes open.

Alvin tried to shoo Becky off to the car, only to be ignored as she climbed up onto the trailer. She turned around and offered him a hand up. With a raised brow, he took her hand and settled in next to her on the trailer. Once everyone was aboard one of the vehicles they started back to the compound, slowly so no one would fall off. Alvin didn’t see any zombies, but he did see a ginger cat the size of a pitbull jumping a fence into a yard. He would have sworn it held a child in its mouth. He looked at Becky, meeting her wide eyes, “We’re going to need a bigger boat.”

Snorting, Becky looked away, “I didn’t hear the music.”

“What are you two talking about?” one of the new guys asked.

Alvin looked back over his shoulder to meet the gaze of a fellow built like a football player, wide across the shoulders and probably well over six feet tall. “How the zombies and animals are changing, which isn’t a good thing,” Alvin told him.

“I still don’t understand how this could even happen,” the guy went on. “If I ever meet someone responsible for this, I’m going to kill the fucker.”

Becky snorted, “I don’t envy your chances. The Pope told the world it was God’s fault, so have fun with that.”

“Especially since he turned tail and ran, which is why we’re here now according to the lore,” Alvin added. “The world is no longer whatever you thought it was, at any rate. If the animals are mutating and the zombies are getting smarter, that doesn’t bode well for the future.”

“Why?” muscle guy asked with a frown.

“It hasn’t been a week since this …apocalypse happened. Normally higher difficulty stuff comes along later, not in the first town. If Green River, aka the starting town, is starting to get ramped-up difficulty, then the rest of this game is going to be horribad.” Alvin pulled his gun and took aim as the truck rolled. “Gothy, at three o’clock, another mutated.”

Becky brought her shotgun up and took aim down the same line. As she did, the panther-like creature darted towards the trailer. The creature’s roars were startlingly loud before they were drowned out by gunfire from Alvin and Becky.

It staggered, then collapsed as the duo pumped round after round into it. Becky flicked her safety on as Alvin reseated his magazine. “One more cat down,” Alvin muttered. “Anyone know how many house pets there are in this town?”

“Statistically, I think it was about two per family on average,” Becky said as she laid her shotgun across her thighs. “We did find quite a few pet corpses that the zombies had killed in a lot of the houses, so mostly only the outside pets or strays should be left.”

“Well, fuck,” Alvin sighed his lips pursed in thought as the rig turned onto the dirt road.

What little conversation there had been died away as the rig rumbled up towards the compound. Once they reached the gate, Alvin saw that the walls had been pushed out to double the distance they had been. He smiled.

“David’s working hard, it seems,” he told Becky, hopping off the trailer as soon as the rig came to a stop.

Chapter Twenty-One

People were climbing out or off of vehicles as they all got parked inside the gate. The newcomers were looking around with evident relief, taking in the solid walls and sturdy buildings. Alvin started untying the ropes holding down the boxes from the Expedition buildings. Becky picked up the first box, handing it down to James.

“Nice to see our newcomers chipping in,” Alvin snarked as he picked up the next box.

“They’re just happy to have real walls around them,” Bill grunted as he took the box from Alvin. “Let ‘em take that in for a minute or two, then they’ll be ready to get to work.”

Just as Bill had said, within a few minutes all of the newcomers pitched in to help get the trailer unloaded. The boxes were ferried into the bunker, with Susan directing people where to stack them while she worked on lunch. She had it ready by the time all of the boxes had been carried in. Ham sandwiches were passed around along with lemonade. The new people filled the dining room, where Bill and Susan were trying to explain the new reality to them.

The older group sat around in the main room, at ease. The women had the available seats, while the men sat on the floor, leaning against walls or furniture. Becky dangled one leg over Alvin’s shoulder when he sat in front of her, making him shake his head. “Trying to eat here, Gothy,” he told her, shifting his plate to keep her boot out of his food.

“You’ll be fine and my feet hurt, if you recall,” she said around a bite of her sandwich.

Betty was frowning, “Don’t you feel anything about your father’s death?”

Becky met Betty's eyes, "Yes. Free. And a little sad that I'll never get to make him apologize to mother or us for what he did to us." She glanced at David, her expression softening, "My brother probably feels worse."

David's face was sad, "He wasn't the best father, but he was still our father, Becky. I don't think he deserved to die. I had hoped that the apocalypse would help him change." He wiped at his eye and cleared his throat, "Becky and mom had it worse than me, so I can't blame her for the way she feels."

Bridget, who was sitting on the sofa closest to him, reached down and rubbed his shoulder, "It's okay, David. If you need to talk later, I'll be willing to listen."

His pain filled eyes met hers for a brief moment before he looked away with a small nod, "Thanks."

Silence fell over the group until the newer group started filing out of the dining room. The big guy Alvin had mentally tagged 'muscle guy' seemed upset. "I'm telling you, that is just stupid. Guns do not just magically reload themselves. This is the real world, not some fucking video game."

"Step outside with me," Bill replied, clamping a hand on the other man's shoulder, guiding him outside. Looking uncertain, the other new people followed them out of the bunker.

Betty popped to her feet, following Bill. Everyone else got slowly to their feet to follow as well, minus Alvin and Becky, who stayed where they were. Alvin leaned his head back against Becky's other leg, that was crossed under her. "Gothy? What is it you want from life now? The world is fucked, your abusive father is dead, your brother is trying to cope. Did you want to try to find your mom?"

Becky shifted her leg, pulling it out from under her, so her legs dangled to either side of Alvin. “Right now what I want is to help you, Hero. When you go out, I want to go with you. I don’t think mom will have survived, but if we head towards Salt Lake we can check.” She wrapped her legs loosely around his torso, “Are you going to allow me to come with you?”

Alvin looked at her legs wrapped around his chest, prompting him to set his drink down. “You did well today. You didn’t panic over Shemp. You helped with the zombies and with the cat thing. I think you would make a fine companion. You do realize, though, that this is the best it will get, that if you go out with me almost certain death awaits us?” He placed his hands on her calves, feeling the muscles through the jeans.

“Probably, but I have faith in my Hero,” She slid forward some, resting her knees on his shoulder. “You saved me from death once, then from trauma at my father’s hands. You saved him once, too, and I won’t hold that against you. You’ve been honest and forthright since the moment we met. Okay, so you’re not Keanu Reeves, but you will kill to protect me and that makes me feel safe. I will promise to aid you in any way you need, as long as you promise to stay with me.”

That same odd feeling he had felt before tingled his chest again. A warm pulse spread through him at her words, his body heating slightly. “Will you kill anything or one that stands in our way?”

“For you, Hero, I will,” she leaned forward and kissed the top of his head.

He leaned his head back against her soft chest, meeting her eyes as they floated above him. “Fine, Gothy. You win. As long as you obey all the orders I give you.”

Her smile sharpened, her eyes sparkling with mischief, “All of your orders… sir?” She stressed the last word, letting it linger on her lips.

A surge of desire swept through him as he recalled how she had wanted to be treated in the car. “You really are a broken, crazy little slut, aren’t you?”

Her lips parted slightly and her eyes dilated, “Do you have to turn me on right now?” She leaned down, kissing him demandingly as her legs tightened on him as her hands raked at his chest through his shirt.

Alvin tightened his hands on her legs, making it hard for anyone to guess who was holding who captive. His mouth met hers just as eagerly, their tongues dueling as desire swept through them both. They pulled apart as a gentle cough got their attention.

“The main room is not the best place for that,” Terry told them as she took back the rocking chair she usually claimed. “The others will be back in a moment. Bill is hoping to discuss what we might be facing and what we should focus on doing next.”

Becky sat back, her legs no longer tight on his chest, though they did twitch under his hands as if she was fighting the urge to tighten them again. He gave her legs one more squeeze before he let them go and stood up. “I should go back to my cell and check in. Jarvis might have more information for me about why the game is ramping up as fast as it is.”

“I could tuck you in,” Becky told him, her gaze intent as she licked her lips.

“That would completely stop me from going,” Alvin told her with a grin. “Tonight, Gothy, tonight we can finish what we started.” He walked down the hall considering his life at the moment. Becky wasn’t a bombshell blonde, like Harley Quinn was portrayed in most media. She was more of a classical beauty, properly padded and with a really nice rack. She was cracked in the head, maybe even as much as he was. Maybe they could be a duo like the Joker and Harley, but not so completely crazy.

A sociopath. That’s what shrinks had called him and he knew he was. He might have been born that way, but his past had helped shape him.

He lacked the empathy to feel the remorse he should feel for a lot of what he did. He could still feel pain, though. When Basha died, the only foster parent he'd liked, he had cried for days over the loss. It was one of the few times he had cried.

Lost in his thoughts, he missed the conversation Terry and Becky began as he left the room. Once he was in a bedroom he sat down on the bed and waited for the light to take him. He appeared in his cell sitting on the bunk, "Jarvis, you gots some splainin' to do," he called out in a very bad accent.

"How droll, sir," Jarvis greeted him. "I cannot give you most of the information you really want, though."

"Error code 403, mechanical voice found?" Alvin asked.

"You seem to be in top form today," Jarvis replied. "That is correct, it would trigger the subroutine. I would suggest you check your experience total, sir, and maybe poke around in the store a bit."

"I can't possibly have gotten fifty large," Alvin replied.

"You have not sir, but there are a number of smaller items that you might wish to look over. Especially as you have seen some new things in the last few hours. You might think about upgrading some of your gear as well."

"You raise a few good points, Jarvis. Take a half holiday next Hogswatch."

"Indeed, very much with the quick wit today. Which is amazing considering how little blood must remain in your head. I can tell you, that you are doing well with the Settlement. Increasing the number of people in the Settlement does directly help you. Building specific buildings can also help them."

Lips pursed in thought, Alvin considered Jarvis's words. "Jarvis, can you give me a better understanding of how the buildings help the Settlers?"

"I'm happy you asked, sir. The crafting buildings can be used to make specific items with the materials produced by the production buildings. They can also be used to spend experience to upgrade items, depending on the building. The Medical Lab, makes it possible for people to heal their wounds as well as being able to produce the healing items found in the shop. The Mechanic Bay deals with vehicles, their upgrades and modifications. It goes on. The Inn you are having built will give a bonus to experience earned for the day to anyone who sleeps in it for at least six hours. People assigned to jobs in a building also get 10% of the experience that is spent in their shop."

Alvin used the bathroom while Jarvis relayed the information he could. After finishing, Alvin pulled up his Summary page to see why Jarvis was wanting him to check it.

World Mode Summary
Total Experience Earned: 15,240 XP
Breakdown: 1 Day in World 2,000 XP, Pre-possessed killed 600 XP, Mutated animal killed 100 XP, Stockpile loot 640 XP, Humans killed -100 XP, Settler Bonus 11,000 XP, Viewer bonus 1,000 XP

Rubbing at his chin, Alvin sat on his bunk going over what he could spend his new XP on. He opened the store page, the Miscellaneous tab automatically moving to the front. The very first item on the page was an Earbud of Translation which had a 10,000 XP cost to buy. He tapped the item Jarvis obviously wanted him to look at.

Earbud of Translation: Cost 10,000 XP
Translates any audible speech into your native language. The translation is always a literal translation and nuances may be lost. Three times per day the Earbud may be used to translate the wearer's speech into the native language of anyone within hearing distance. Outward translation lasts one minute per use.

Alvin leaned back against the wall as he stroked at his slowly growing beard. “Jarvis, how does the Settlement gain XP?” Alvin was only half-listening for the answer as he turned over the implications of an item like the Earbud being available. It seemed obvious that he would start encountering people who didn’t speak the same language soon.

“Settlement XP is based on the number of Settlers, how well they perform any Job they are given, and whether they kill anything or acquire loot for the Settlement. It all comes down to a complex formula that I cannot divulge to you.”

“Short version, as long as they do things the Settlement gets XP?”

“Correct, sir,” Jarvis replied. “Did you look over any random item that you happened to find in the store, sir?”

Jarvis was being deliberately evasive which made Alvin think maybe they were watched in his cell after all. Why would that matter, though, and why was Jarvis being super helpful now? Alvin chewed his lip for a second. It could be because Jarvis really wanted him to buy the Hologram AI Power. Shaking his head, Alvin looked at the Earbud again, “I did, but I’m not sold that I should pick it up right now.”

“It is your choice, sir,” Jarvis replied. “Is there anything else I can do for you at this time?”

“Can you recommend an upgrade for my gun?”

“No sir, I am unable to recommend any one ability over another. Blessed weapons may or may not be more useful than silvered ones.”

The zombies weren’t being called shamblers, or even walkers now, they had been called pre-possessed on the summary page. Jarvis’s vague hints toward the blessed upgrade for the gun made Alvin shiver. Possessed beings would make sense in that context, and maybe that was why the animals were mutating as well. He opened the upgrade tab and checked the cost for the Blessed ammunition upgrade.

He set aside the idea of upgrading either of his guns. He didn't have the upgrade slots available for either one to be able to get Blessed ammunition. He decided he should probably talk with Bill about available weapon upgrades, though.

"What did you say about modifying vehicles?" Alvin asked Jarvis.

"If you drive a vehicle that hasn't been claimed by someone, you may purchase the rights to it in the store or in the Vehicle Bay. Once you have done so, it can be upgraded like any other piece of gear."

Alvin grinned as he opened the vehicle tab in the store and looked over all the vehicles he had driven of late. He found the Mustang and looked at the cost to buy it, 10,000 XP. He quickly bought it, then opened the upgrade tab for it.

1969 Mustang Boss 429 (Rare)
Armor: 3
Durability: 169,253/250,000
Upgradable: 0/9

Fuel Economy (rank 1): Gives you twice the miles per gallon, (this ain't no Hummer). Cost: 1,000 XP.

Fuel Economy (rank 2): Requires rank 1. Anything burnable is now fuel. Mileage may vary (hello Doc Brown). Cost: 5,000 XP.

Fuel Economy (rank 3): Requires rank 2. No longer needs fuel (oh come on, not even Doc Brown managed this). Cost: 15,000 XP.

Tires (rank 1): All terrain tire. Tires are now all terrain tires, good for all conditions, (Neither rain, nor sleet, nor snow…what, are you a postman now?). Cost 500 XP.

Tires (rank 2): Requires rank 1. Indestructible tires. Vehicle can now off-road like a 4-wheel Jeep (glass, screws, old ladies- run over it

all). Cost 2,500 XP.

Armor (rank 1): Adds 3 Armor to the overall vehicle (afraid of bugs splashing your paint job?). Cost 2,000 XP.

Armor (rank 2): Requires rank 1. Adds 6 Armor to the overall vehicle (now small children can't damage your ride). Cost 5,000 XP.

Armor (rank 3): Requires rank 2. Adds 9 Armor to the overall vehicle (in Soviet Russia, moose fears car). Cost 15,000 XP.

Armor (rank 4): Requires rank 3. Adds 12 Armor to the overall vehicle (seriously? You really like this thing, don't you?). Cost 30,000 XP.

Armor (rank 5): Requires rank 4. Adds 15 Armor to the overall vehicle (the next best thing to a tank). Cost 50,000 XP.

Durability (rank 1): Double the durability of the vehicle (want it to last do you?). Cost 2,000 XP.

Durability (rank 2): Requires rank 1. Four times the initial durability (attached much?). Cost: 15,000 XP

Glove Box: Creates two storage spots in the glove box. Storage spots function as bags (just like a woman's purse, it can hold anything). Cost 1,000 XP.

He didn't upgrade anything, but couldn't help grinning at the car being rare and having so many upgrade slots. As he did, he felt something in his pocket and reached in to find a set of keys. “These are for the car?”

“That is correct, sir,” Jarvis replied. “You can also summon it to your side if you are at a Settlement. I would like to point out an upgrade to the Hologram AI power, as well.”

Alvin opened the store again to the page Jarvis directed him to. He started laughing as he read the description. “Really?”

Hologram AI Smartcar: Requires Hologram AI. Cost 20,000 XP. Upgrade your Power to allow your helpful AI to be inside your vehicle as well as any Settlement. Allows access to the full range of services provided by the Hologram AI. (Kind of like Knight Rider, isn’t it?)

“Well, I could also…” Jarvis cut off abruptly, his voice gone mechanical when he resumed, “That information is not authorized at this time.”

“You’ve got to stop tripping yourself up, Jarvis.”

“Quite,” Jarvis’s voice was tight, obviously upset that he had tripped his subroutine. “Needless to say, it doesn’t explain everything.”

“I need to head back to the Settlement. Bill wants to have a pow-wow to decide what we should be aiming for. Now that I know about the cars, I’ll have to clue him in. It’ll make fuel much easier to cope with.”

“Have a good night, sir. Perhaps I will see you tomorrow.”

“Night, Jarvis.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Back at the compound, Alvin made his way out to the main room. Everyone else was gathered there already and it was standing room only at this point. Susan was going over what each of the buildings were and what she had learned they could do. Alvin leaned against a wall listening in, trying to work out how much time it would take to upgrade each of the processing buildings all 100 ranks, or the crafting buildings the 20 ranks they each had available. Improving the rank of a building also increased the chance of getting various bonuses, which would have to be taken into consideration.

Susan wound down and looked across the room at Alvin, “Alvin, will you tell us what you found out?”

Pushing off the wall, Alvin took Susan’s spot in the middle of the room. Susan settled herself onto James’s lap. Alvin’s eyes moved from that development to Becky, seated on the floor near Terry. He cleared his throat, looking around at everyone else in the room. “Jarvis wasn’t entirely forthright, but I did glean at least one bit of information. Guns can be upgraded to fire silver and/or blessed ammunition. Considering that the zombies we killed today were called pre-possessed, I think it means blessed ammo is probably going to be needed in the future.”

There was a moment of muttering as people received the information. He gave them that moment, then went on, “More news. The Settlement gains XP several ways. People who are assigned jobs and shops, killing monsters, and looting items or scrap all contribute to Settlement XP. The Settlement also gets a chunk of bonus XP with each new member added. On the other hand, it’s a long, long road to upgrade everything we have access to here. The more people we have working on everything, the faster it’ll get done.”

This sparked a round of questions about jobs. He cut them off, "Susan can tell you about jobs. Another thing I found out, is there's an item in the store called an Earbud Translator. This points to other intelligent beings showing up at some point. We don't know who or what those intelligences might be. At this point, I'll be surprised if they're human. I would be wary of any of them we meet."

"Also, it seems that animals are mutating. Keep your eyes sharp, even inside the walls. It would be bad to lose someone to a squirrel the size of a Saint Bernard. Or a mosquito the size of a Beagle, if insects mutate. Lastly, we can't give up on looting and scrapping, we just need to shift how we've been handling it. Each project inside the walls can only have one person assigned to it. We've got multiple projects lined up to work on. Susan will be assigning people to jobs."

"It isn't hard," David chimed in. "I expanded all the walls before lunch today. All you do is follow the blue icons and do what they tell you to do, which for me was mostly hammer at a wall. Anyone can do it, so don't worry that it will be too hard for you. Al, I'd like to be back on clean up duty tomorrow."

"Susan will arrange it," Alvin told David before turning back to the rest of the room. "One of the buildings we should prioritize is the Vehicle Bay. Vehicles can be upgraded to no longer need conventional fuel. The other thing we should build soon are the automated turrets. Susan, have you looked at those?"

She nodded, "It will take some time without resources, but I'll assign a person to each corner tower. The Inn still needs to be done, and we can build the Vehicle Bay along with another building."

"Medical Unit," Alvin replied without thought. "That will let us heal people and buy medkits. Those will help keep you alive longer."

"I'll assign people to those jobs when we're done here, then. That will require seven people," Susan replied as she shifted on James's lap, a small smile curling her lips.

James seemed torn between wanting to hold her and embarrassed by all the eyes on him. “What about the rest of today?” James asked as he shifted in his own seat just slightly, as if trying to get comfortable.

“Here’s my plan for how we need to go forward with the looting. We have a heavily armed looting squad. All the looters will be armed with pistols. Four guards with them at all times, all armed with rifles or shotguns. The secondary team will be Bill, Becky, James and me. We will be taking one tow truck down and clearing the road. We should be the more likely target for monsters since we’ll be further away. One person will stay in the truck at all times, one person will be hooking, the other two will be ready to shoot anything that moves. Any questions?”

“What makes you so damned special?” the jock from earlier asked.

Alvin locked eyes with him, “This Settlement only exists because of me. If not for me, you would not even exist.”

“This is all your fault, then,” the guy hissed with narrowed eyes. “They said that this is all a game, because of a single guy. You’re him, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Alvin said, his hands tingling as he waited to grab his pistol.

“Motherfucker,” the jock snapped as he lunged at Alvin.

Becky tackled the guy at the knees from where she sat next to Terry. The jock went down hard with Becky holding on. “No you don’t,” Becky snarled.

People were climbing to their feet and yelling as the jock reached for Becky. He stopped dead when Alvin kicked him hard in the head. Jock’s head rebounded off the ground, and he went completely limp. Alvin reached down, pulling Becky to her feet, “That was my fight.”

She met his eyes, “No. He attacked you. That made it my fight, too. I told you, Hero, I will always be there.”

“Is it true, is this all because of you?” one of the other newcomers asked.

“If I wasn’t here, either your world would never have existed or it would vanish as if it never was. Think of me as the main character in a role-playing game, the story stops if I die. The world could well go on for all of you if I die, just keep getting worse and worse without me here to help. Or it could suddenly cease to exist. This wasn’t my idea any more than it was any of yours, but this is the only game in town. A word of warning. I don’t react well when attacked. Too many things want to be entirely unreasonable. Next time I won’t kick, it will be much more painful and possibly deadly.”

“There wasn’t any need to hurt Edwin,” another man said, kneeling next to the unconscious jock. “He gets a little excitable sometimes, but he never hurt anyone before.”

Alvin looked at the idiot claiming the muscle man hadn’t been about to hurt him. Shaking his head, he looked at Susan, “One hour and we head out. Give Edwin a building job inside the walls. I don’t think he’d survive outside.”

“Okay,” Susan said as she got to her feet. “Who else wants to stay inside the walls?”

Several people approached Susan, most of them trying to talk all at once. Alvin headed down the hall towards a bedroom. He shoved the door open angrily, only to be shoved from behind which sent him stumbling forward, to end up sprawled on the room’s bed. Rolling over quickly his hand reached for his gun, but slowed when he saw Becky smirking at him as she locked the door. “An hour isn’t what I’d hoped for, but I’ll take it.”

“Really, Gothy? Now?” Alvin asked incredulously.

She pulled her shirt off, revealing creamy skin as well as her huge tits, barely held in place by her bra. “Yes, now.” She bent at her waist to untie her shoes, giving him a really good view of her mammoth breasts. Alvin felt himself respond to her deliberate provocation. Giving in to what they both wanted, he sat up and took his own boots off. As he removed his boots she pushed him onto his back, following him to the bed.

Lips meeting in feverish need, they rolled on the bed as their tongues mingled, each one seeking supremacy. Alvin got Becky onto her back, reaching up to pin her arms to the bed. Breaking the kiss, he gazed down at her panting, “Fuck, you needy little slut, you’re going to drive me insane.”

Becky moaned as he spoke, “Promises, promises, Hero. Now are you going to take me, or talk to me?” She wrapped her legs around him and lifted her hips to meet his. “I might be a little bigger than other girls, but I will rock your world like no other.”

Leaning down, he twisted to the side and nipped her ear, firmly but not hard enough to draw blood. She whimpered as her hips rocked against his, “Going to mark me as yours? Or are you too scared to try?” Her breath was husky as she panted the words, obviously aroused as she continued to dry fuck him through their jeans.

Growling, Alvin pulled her hands together, using one hand to pin both of hers in place as he reached down between them to undo their jeans. He was almost as frantic as she was as he got his jeans undone, then hers. As soon as he took his hand away she unwrapped her legs and whimpered as he continued to nibble at her neck and ear. “Hero, I need you.”

Alvin pulled back from her, standing up to shuck off his own jeans while Becky did the same thing from on the bed. She shoved her jeans off the bed, and writhed as she reached behind herself to unfasten the bra. Her tits spilled out, and she opened her legs, reaching for him. “You are fucking gorgeous,” Alvin growled, his anatomy indicating how much he really meant the compliment. “I’m going to devour you, until you beg for more.”

“Promises, promises, Hero,” she husked at him. “Are you going to keep talking or put that tongue to better use?” She tapped her sex with one hand as her other pinched at a nipple. “Come devour me whole.”

Alvin dropped to his knees, pulling her to the edge of the bed. He wasted no time allowing his tongue to trace her wanton sex. He found her juices already leaking out of her, he let out a moan of his own. She was a touch musky from all the work they’d done today, but it had been so long for him that it was like ambrosia. He eagerly lapped at her, making sure to cover her entire mound before he started to focus on her slowly engorging clit.

Becky let out a deep moan as his lips found her love button. “Oh, god. Yes, Hero, that’s it.” She hooked her legs around his shoulders, drawing him closer to her sex. “Right there, just a little faster. Nibble me, taste me, devour me, Hero.” Her words grew more frantic as she spoke, her heels driving into his shoulder.

Alvin followed her instructions and Becky went rigid, as he began to nibble her. A muffled scream came from her as he continued to nibble at her, using his teeth as she continued to buck against his mouth. She bucked harder, her pelvis slamming into his teeth. Alvin jerked his head back at that point as Becky rode her orgasm down. He climbed up onto the bed, looking at her as she pulled the hand away from her mouth as her body continued to shake.

He was past waiting as he pushed her up the bed, far enough for him to end up between her legs. He met her eyes as she came down a little from her orgasm, “My turn.” He pushed his hips forward, having already lined up. His shaft sank into her a few inches, his eyes twitching as he felt her smooth, hot passage accept him. She moaned, bringing her hand up to cover her mouth again. He pulled almost all the way back out before he rocked his hips forward again, this time sinking in just a touch further.

Letting out a ragged breath he kept his eyes locked on hers as he repeated the motion. Both of them muffling their moans of pleasure as he continued to slowly sink into her until he buried himself fully into her. He

paused, leaning down supported by one arm, as he moved her hand away from her mouth. He kissed her hungrily, getting the same passion in return even as he rocked his hips out a few inched then back in hard. The kiss muffled their gasps of pleasure, even as it continued. After a few minutes he broke the kiss, leaning back and positioning her legs over his shoulders as he sat back on his haunches.

“Ready, Gothy?” he asked his manhood twitching inside of her as he was already close to the edge.

“Fill me, I want it,” she panted as she began to tweak and pinch her own nipples roughly. “Just tell me what a naughty little bitch I am while you take me.”

He leaned against her legs, slapping her hands aside to take her soft globes into his own hands. “Cover your dirty, slutty mouth. I’m going to make you scream.” She did as he said and he felt her passage clamp down around him tighter. Groaning himself at the feeling of her, he roughly handled her breasts, watching her nipples harden even more at his touch. He rocked back before slamming forward, hard. He grunted each time he repeated the thrust, and her muffled cries steadily gained volume. Each thrust was met with a little more pressure as he started to speak. “You like being a fuck toy? Eager to be taken by a hard cock.” He grunted as his hips started to jack hammer faster as he felt himself start to tip over the edge. “I’ll fill you with my thick seed, you eager little slut. Take it like the cum hungry bitch you are.” Her tunnel became a vise as he slammed home with short hard thrusts as his seed began to spill from him.

His mind went blank as pleasure overrode his ability to think, as spurt after spurt pumped deep into her. When he could think again, she was still panting under him, her eyes bright as she looked up at him. “You sure know how to show a dirty girl a good time, Hero. Fuck, it’s been a long time since I’ve had someone that good.”

Alvin rolled off to the side, collapsing next to her. “You’re only eighteen, how is that even possible?”

“I fucked my first guy at fifteen,” Becky said as she rolled to her side, her leg going over his waist as she laid her head on his chest. “I have more experience than you do, I would wager. It was one of the ways I rebelled against my father. You are easily in the top three, though. You made a good run for the top spot, but you came up a little short in duration. Maybe next time you can take it.” Her smile was mischievous.

Alvin began to chuckle, “Guess you weren’t kidding about not being pure, then. You’re really snug for having a lot of experience, Gothy. Are you always that wet right at the start?”

“Talk dirty to me, pull my hair, or spank me,” Gothy murmured into his chest. “Anything that makes me feel like a dirty slut will get me going. I’ve been ready since the kiss in the main room. I needed this so bad. I know I’m messed up in the head, which is why it never works out for me. Will you be able to handle me, Hero?”

A knock came at the door. Bill’s voice came easily through the door. “Alvin, we’re about ready. Ten minutes.”

“I’m broken in my own ways, Gothy. We can see where we mesh and try to make it work.” Alvin smiled at her, calling out as he got up, “Be right there.”

“See you in ten minutes,” Becky called out as she pushed Alvin back down. She slipped down his body, taking his mostly flaccid member into her mouth, her tongue lapping up the juices that mingled there.

Alvin’s eyes rolled up and his toes curled as she worked her magic on him. “We only have ten minutes, Gothy.”

She released him briefly to respond, “I’ll get you there.” She went right back to work, eagerly devouring him. She moaned as she worked on his shaft, the vibrations adding to the pleasure that coursed through him.

“Fucking gods, you horny bitch. Didn’t you already have enough?”

Not pausing she increased her speed as he hardened in her mouth. Her tongue swirled all around his manhood, cleaning every drop of their combined juices as she brought him to full attention again. Deepthroating his cock, she let her throat muscles contract around the head of his shaft. The sensation was close to the way her passage had milked his manhood just a minute ago, which helped bring him even closer to coming again.

He reached down and tangled his hands in her raven hair, taking control of her actions. She moaned louder as he began to thrust into her mouth almost as roughly as he had taken her just a minute ago. “Oh gods, I fucking love this, you wanton fuck slut.” He face fucked her, feeling his balls begin to constrict again, on the edge not even five minutes after having just released inside of her. A minute later he pushed her all the way down as his seed filled her mouth. He was grunting and moaning as his hips bucked against her lips, until he collapsed in a quivering puddle.

Slowly, inch by inch she came up his softening shaft, cleaning each inch as she went. Once she released him she got to her feet, a look of triumph on her face. “I might like being controlled in bed, but I also love making a man beg me for more.” She looked around, shrugging as she picked up Alvin’s shirt and cleaned herself with it. She dropped the sex stained shirt on his chest as she pulled on her panties. “Less than five minutes left,” she half taunted him.

Shaking his head, he looked over at her mostly naked form, a pleased smile coming to his lips. “You are more than a touch crazy, you know that? Then again, so am I, so maybe, just maybe, we’re a matched set.” He sniffed his shirt as he looked at her, his flaccid member trying to stir again. “Fucking Christ, I’m not a teenager anymore,” he muttered. He rolled to the edge of the bed and pulled his socks and underwear on as Becky chased down her bra and got it on. Alvin put his jeans on as she also did, watching her the entire time. He slipped his boots on as she sat down next to him to do the same.

He finished tying his boots before she did, so he lunged, pinning her to the bed and kissed her hard. Her mouth welcomed his invasion as she returned the kiss, a pleased sound coming from her. He jerked away,

snatching up her shirt from the floor and put it on. It hung on his torso loosely. She watched him with a puzzled expression. “Can’t wear mine now, so I’ll take yours.”

Becky picked up his shirt from the bed, draping it over her shoulder as she got to her feet. “Guess I need to grab another one, then. Be out in a minute.” She swayed past him, smacking his ass on her way to the door. “I’ll take your shirt as a memento, in case you can’t join me later tonight.”

Alvin jerked slightly at the spank, turning as she left the room. A wolf whistle came from the hall. Stepping out of the room a moment later, Alvin found one of the guys from the Colorado Expeditions group staring at one of the other bedroom doors. Shaking his head, Alvin went right past the man, not saying a word. Becky did indeed deserve the whistle. Bill frowned at him when he finally got outside.

“What happened to your shirt?” Bill asked.

“Traded it in. She might give it back later.”

“Where is she?” James asked.

“Getting a new shirt, she’ll be right out. Who’s driving the truck?”

“Me,” Bill replied, “James will be hooking, you and Becky are the guards. I need to get you to exchange the 1911 for one of the other guns, though. We need another pistol for the loot team.”

“I’ll use your Tommy for now,” Alvin shrugged, exchanging guns. “I was going to ask about getting a different one anyway. The 1911 is only common and capped with the ammo and durability upgrades. I want one I can get to the other ammo upgrades with.”

“We’ll run through all the guns tonight, then,” Bill nodded. “Least I can do for you.”

“You two head on down,” Alvin told them. “I’ll give Gothy a ride down in my car.”

“What car?” Bill asked.

Alvin pulled up his character screen and tapped the summon vehicle button. The Mustang appeared inside the yard behind Bill, “That car,” he said, pointing behind Bill, “I claimed it as my own. I can summon it to any Settlement that I’ve found.”

“Which is how you knew about the vehicle upgrades,” James nodded as he looked at the car. “That is a damn fine car.”

“Rare, too, which means I can upgrade the fuck out of it.”

Bill sighed, “We need to get the working cars moved this way, as well as clearing the roads. We can work on that today. I’ll get the others to follow us to town. They can jump out at each working car and drive them back up here. We can park them on the sides of the road for now, and once everyone has brought a car back they can get on with the looting.”

“Good plan,” Alvin agreed.

“Is that my car?” Becky asked as she joined them, eyeing the white Mustang.

“It’s my car,” Alvin told her, holding up the keys.

“Oh, my man-toy has a sweet ride, and it’s a classic muscle car,” Becky smirked.

Shaking his head Bill walked away, “Give me another two minutes.”

“I’ll go get ready,” James added as he also walked away.

“Now, what do I have to do for you to give me that car?” Becky purred as she stepped close to him.

“Nothing,” Alvin replied.

“Just going to give it to me?” She smirked, “I know I’m good…”

“No,” he interrupted her. “Nothing you do will make me give up the car.” Her mouth snapped shut, her eyes going hooded, as she eyed him. At her expression, he chuckled, “You’re going with me, which means you will forever be shotgun. Unless I let you drive now and again.”

Her lips quirked up and her eyes sparkled, “Just took a taste of magic to agree to take me with you, eh?”

Meeting her eyes, he dropped the laughter and became serious. “No. I want you with me because you really do seem to be a match for me, Gothy. You attacked a person who might have been a threat. You have been fearless against the monsters and you seem to really want to be with me.” His lips ticked up slightly, “It’s just a bonus that you’re as kinked and cracked as I am.”

Laughing, she slid closer to him and pulled his head down for quick kiss. “I think I like the world more now, than I ever did before.”

Putting his arms around her he rested his head against hers, “You’re making me want to agree with that.”

“We’re ready,” Bill called out from next to the truck.

Alvin dropped the keys into Becky’s hand, before swatting her ass, “Drive, bitch.”

She ran for the car, jumping in and cranking the engine. The engine rumbled to life and growled as she goosed it. Alvin slid into the passenger side with the Tommy gun on his lap. “Don’t damage her,” he told Becky as he buckled in.

“No promises,” Becky laughed as she dropped the parking break. She tore out of the yard, letting the beast run. “Woohoo!”

Alvin began to laugh as he held onto the Tommy gun with one hand and the open window with the other. He shook his head in amazement as Becky seemed to match his mood so well. “Crazy bitch,” there was only amusement and acceptance in his tone as they flew down the road.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The Mustang slid as Becky flung it off the dirt road, the tires squealing as they found the asphalt. As they came out of the slide Becky giggled, “That was so much fun.”

“You also tore tread off my tires, and this hasn’t been upgraded yet so please tone it down a touch.”

Becky huffed, “I just want to see if she’s as wild as I am. What are you going to call her?” Becky slowed down to let the others catch up.

“Ruffian,” Alvin said without having to think about it. “Fastest filly ever. She broke her leg during a race, but she has been acknowledged as the fastest ever by the best jockeys.”

“How do you even know that?” Becky asked.

“When I was eleven, the foster family they placed me with ran a racing stable. I was only there for six months but that bit of trivia has stuck with me. If I considered cars male I would have named her Man O’ War. It was hotly debated by Mr. Weston and his father whether Man O’ War or Secretariat would have won if they had raced against each other.”

“So why Man O’ War over Secretariat?”

“Like the name better,” Alvin chuckled, “moot point, though. Cars are female. Treat them right, give them what they want and normally they won’t snap on you.”

Laughing. Becky glanced over, “You’re going to treat me right and give me what I want, then?”

“I will treat you as you seem to want and I will give you what we both want. Just in the proper time and place.”

Smirking, Becky shook her head, “I won’t snap on you unless you try to set me aside.”

“Well, that isn’t likely to happen then, now is it?”

“I don’t know,” Becky replied, her lips thinning. “Every other guy I’ve been with, did as soon as someone prettier came along.”

“Variety is the spice of life?” Alvin added with a straight face. At Becky’s frown he added hurriedly, “I doubt anyone can make me turn away from you at this point, Becky. I mean, I’m going to look and admire, but I don’t think I would set you aside for anyone else.”

“Damn well better not, Hero. I might share you if I think she’s worth my time, but if you stray without me…”

Lips pursed, Alvin shook his head, “Sharing is caring.”

Snorting, Becky glanced over at him, “Sharing is caring. I’ll let you sample here or there as long as I’m there. I kind of enjoy breaking some of the thin ones, myself.”

Alvin shifted, coughing as the image of Becky pinning a thin blonde to a bed flashed through his mind. “Well, that might get interesting.”

Licking her lips suggestively, Becky laughed, “Oh, I think we can make life very interesting.”

She pulled to a stop at the first set of vehicles that had been set aside from the others. “Shall we play guard?”

“Time to earn our pay,” Alvin replied as he got out. Bill pulled just past them in the tow truck, and the rig stopped behind him. Alvin called out to the people sitting on the rig, “Four cars,” and pointed them out.

Betty, Bridget, David and one of the newcomers jumped down off the rig. Each approached a car with a flathead screwdriver in hand, getting in they started the cars then drove them toward the compound. Alvin and Becky kept their guns shouldered as they looked around for threats. The arrangement was repeated with only minor variations for the next hour, until twenty cars had been moved to the compound. The looting group rode back out together and picked up where they'd left off. Once everyone who'd ridden out on the rig was headed back to the compound, Bill, James, Alvin and Becky went back to clearing the road.

It was when Bill was moving the fourth wreck off the road that Becky called out. "Contact," she yelled just before her gun fired.

Alvin and James spun to face her side of the street. What Alvin's saw was a nightmare for people afraid of bugs. A six-foot-long scorpion was scuttling towards them from a side street. Becky's shot had made it pause, but the pellets only seemed to ricochet off its carapace. James got the next shot, and again the pellets from the shotgun bounced off its shell, but it flinched down as if protecting its eyes.

Alvin leveled the Tommy gun, he had made sure it was on semi-auto. The first three rounds from the magazine impacted along its back. Two of them didn't seem to do anything. The third shot hit the tail, knocking it backward. When it came back up, it didn't arch as high as it had before. With a click of its claws the mutated bug started forward again.

It rushed forward faster than the trio expected, closing the distance as they all fired again. At fifty feet the buckshot from the shotguns started cracking the shell. It slowed as it twisted side to side to avoid taking damage to its eyes. The next burst from the Tommy gun cracked right into the face plate of the scorpion, shattering the plates but not punching through into the body.

With a high pitched scream that hurt their ears, it dashed forward again. They unloaded their weapons into it as it came closer and closer. James and Becky dove to the sides, their guns flipped to safety to reload.

Alvin fired his last round of ammo right into its face as a claw swept in towards his left hand side.

The claw bit into Alvin's leg, sending pain lancing through him. The other claw snagged his arm, the pain from that injury paling in comparison to his leg. Another cascade of gun fire erupted from either side of the beast as it raised its tail over Alvin.

The tail was sheared from its body, causing the scorpion to drop Alvin as it turned towards James. James ducked around the car that was hooked to the tow truck. As Alvin was released he screamed as the pain he felt suddenly tripled. His horrified glance at his leg revealed a terrible truth, his leg was severed.

Becky rushed to him, “Al, what do I do?” Her tone was demanding as she yanked her shirt off and tried to tourniquet the leg. Blood spurted from the stump of his leg in time with his heartbeat until she managed to get the makeshift tourniquet tight.

He fumbled at his belt pouch, pulling out the regrowth kit. “Leg,” the word was a gasp. His vision wavered and went grey as the pain overwhelmed him.

She yanked the patch open and slapped it to his leg. As his screams renewed she was worried that something had gone wrong. As she looked down, she could see the leg rebuilding before her eyes. The leg bone was being rebuilt, followed by the muscles, blood vessels, tendons and more.

She looked up at the sound of Bill's gun joining James'. Bill stood in the open door of the truck, firing down into the top of the scorpion. She got to her feet while Alvin was still writhing on the ground as his leg regrew. She stalked behind the scorpion, her eyes blazing with anger. “That is MY Hero, you fucking overgrown bug.”

She closed to point blank range from behind and her shotgun barked in rapid succession as she emptied it into the beast. It staggered to the side, bleeding heavily from the wound she opened in its back.

Clacking, it turned to run off, only to stop suddenly. It came face to face with Alvin, now back on his feet with the Tommy gun reloaded. He fired controlled bursts into its face, the bullets punching through its eyes this time. The monster dropped like a stone as the bullets ricocheted inside the exoskeleton, shredding it.

Panting, he looked up to find James, Bill and Becky all staring at him. “I’m no bug’s fucking chew toy.”

“No, you’re MY fucking chew toy,” Becky replied, stepping forward to kiss him hard.

After a minute, they separated. Bill and James were both pointedly keeping watch, looking everywhere but at the couple. Bill coughed, “This isn’t good. Our guns had way too much trouble punching through that thing’s shell.”

“Need to upgrade guns for jacketed ammo, or slugs in the case of the shotguns. Then it’ll ignore half the armor value of what you hit with it. That would have punched through.” Alvin stopped suddenly as his eyes fell on his own leg still lying on the ground. With a shuddering breath he looked away, “Another reason we should work on upgrading buildings. He looked down at his no longer damaged leg. Even his jeans had been repaired. “That is freaky as shit.”

“You will be getting another of those kits?” Becky asked, but it sounded more like a command.

“Of course. It just saved my life. Cheap at the price. Okay, do we call it or keep going?” Alvin asked Bill.

“We haven’t seen a lot of the oddities, maybe we can keep going for another hour or two.”

“Okay, let’s get back to it,” Alvin turned toward his car. He looked over his shoulder at Becky to find her looking at him. “Thank you.”

Her lips quirked up, “Can’t have my Hero dying on me, now can I? If you died, who would be my fuck-toy?”

He laughed once, “You didn’t panic. You are damn near the perfect companion.”

“Oh but I am perfect, just you wait and see,” she replied as they followed the tow truck to the next group of vehicles.

They didn’t encounter any other monsters, but they did hear the sound of gunfire from the direction of the looters. The quartet looked that way, but continued to work. When they finally called it a day, everyone but Bill drove the three nearest drivable cars to the compound. Bill followed in the tow truck, the corpse of the scorpion dragging along behind it. The Mustang was left parked off the road in town, since Alvin knew he could summon it to him at the Settlement.

Alvin smiled at the twenty-three cars lined the sides of the road, as they followed the rig through the gates. Everyone pitched in to help unload the trailer into the Scrapper. Most of them winced at the zombie corpses, trying hard to handle them as little as possible.

Everyone eyed the dead arachnid as it was dragged into the scrapper by Alvin, his severed leg on top of the corpse. He turned to face the gathered Settlers as Susan rolled the door closed. “That proves it’s not just dogs and cats mutating. The armor on that thing was almost too much for our current guns. Take your time and aim for the eyes, the bullets can punch through there. The tail can be damaged and removed with enough fire power, as well. I lost a leg to that one. It sheared right through the bone. The armor on my jacket saved my arm, but it still hurts like a bitch. The moral here is, stay vigilant and if need be run away. We can’t fix dead, or at least not yet.”

He started towards the bunker, then realized that the Inn was finished. He changed direction, heading that way instead. He heard conversation from the people gathered around the Scrapper, but ignored

them. Susan called out to him that dinner would be in two hours. He waved to signal he'd heard as he entered the Inn.

He looked around the main room with a nod. Terry came in behind him, "Rooms for the day cost one hundred XP and go up from there. It's a grand for the big room."

Alvin nodded as he went to the bar. A number of bottles were lined up along the wall behind the bar. He spotted several that he knew had been scavenged in the past few days. "What about the rest of it?"

"Drinks run anywhere from a few dozen XP to a few hundred, depending on what you want," Terry told him as she slipped behind the bar.

"I'll take the best room for the night. Becky will be sharing it with me." A pop-up appeared in front of him, asking him to confirm renting the room for 1000 XP. He clicked yes and a key appeared in his hand. "Well, that was interesting." He met Terry's eyes, "Do you want a different job? This one isn't going to be generating much XP."

"I'm fine, I don't think I'll be needing much," she replied. "If there's nothing else you want right now, I'm going to head over to the bunker and see how everyone is getting on."

"Works. Hey, maybe suggest to James he play in here tonight?"

Grinning, she nodded, "Already did."

"See you in a bit then, Gran," he said as he took the stairs to the second floor to find his room.

The room looked a lot like a hotel suite. Big room with a king-sized bed, a sofa, a desk and chair. The room had an attached bathroom that surprised Alvin. The walk-in shower was big enough for three or four people, it even had multiple shower heads. The bathtub was equally large, with molded seating and what looked like Jacuzzi nozzles.

He was grinning over his discovery when he heard a knock on the door. He opened it to find Becky with a suitcase in her hand. “Maid service. Can I turn down your bed, or maybe you’d prefer me to warm it instead?”

He stepped aside, “I will be more than happy to avail myself of your offers tonight.”

She nudged the door shut with her foot, dropping the case inside the door. “Susan said we have about two hours. I want to give you a complete checkup and make sure you have no other injuries.”

“Round two?”

Her eyes sparkled, “Round two, fight.”

Alvin snagged her hand, pulling her hard to his chest. He grinned down at her as he lowered his head to claim a passionate kiss. The kiss was full of desire, but also tempered as they took the time to explore the other’s wants.

When the kiss finally came to an end, Becky looked at him with mischievous eyes, “Think you can take the top spot this time, Hero?”

“Probably not,” Alvin told her as he spun her around so her back was pressed to his chest. “I’m going to take my time and explore all of your delightful curves.” His hands roamed over her wide hips, up her rounded stomach, before finally cupping her massive breasts. “Got to find where all your buttons are, don’t I?”

Becky pressed her ass against his groin, feeling his growing excitement. “Going to try to find them all?”

Chuckling he stripped her shirt off, “That is my objective. Well, besides making your eyes roll into the back of your head.”

“Challenge accepted,” Becky panted as one of his hands slipped into her jeans. She widened her legs, giving him better access as she began to

undo her jeans.

The talking came to a stop as his hands roamed over her lushly padded body. He delighted in her moans and gasps of pleasure as he explored her. He eventually got her onto the bed so he could again taste her.

“Hmm, that’s it, Hero. You did so well the first time, don’t fail me now,” Becky breathed as he began to kiss her mound.

He took his time, even though she begged and pleaded with him to go faster. His lips kissed every inch of her wet womanhood before he began to caress her flesh with his tongue. Her legs wrapped around his shoulders as she tried to pull him even closer to her.

“Stop teasing me, Hero, please,” her voice was pleading and breathless.

He grinned at her need, and giving in he let his tongue dig into her wet folds. Her deep moan sent a shiver of desire through him. He started with strong firm laps of her sex, covering every inch but the one she wanted most.

When he felt her hands reach for his head, he grabbed her wrists, holding her firmly. He pulled his face back enough to meet her lust crazed eyes. “I’m exploring, you needy slut. At my pace, in my time. You just lay there and beg some more. Maybe I’ll give you what you really want.”

Becky tried to glare at him, but the euphoric high of being held near the crest of orgasm spoiled the effect. “I’ll get you back for this, Hero.”

Grinning, he lowered his head, keeping her hands locked with his. His tongue fluttered across her clit, making her gasp and her hips rise up. “Maybe, but not right now,” Alvin chuckled as he went back to letting his tongue caress her.

He continued his exquisite torture of her for minutes, her moans and gasps becoming more frantic as he kept her hovering at the edge. He

eventually relented and began to pay her love button the attention she begged for.

As soon as his tongue flicked across it, her back arched as she was but a small step from the orgasm he had denied her all this time. Knowing she was on edge, he gave her another firm lick, before clamping down hard on it with his lips.

Her guttural moan as she finally got her release was music to his ears. He upped the ante by vibrating his lips as if he was playing a trumpet. Her sudden gasp as her hips began to buck, let him know he had her cresting immediately into a second orgasm. He let up, and watched her begin to calm before he nibbled at her engorged clit with his teeth. This time her moan came out sounding more like a starved beast as she broke his hold on her hands and pressed his face hard into her.

Once she calmed enough to let his head go, he took a few ragged gasps, reclaiming the oxygen he had been denied while being held. Sliding up her limp body he smiled at her as he slid his cock into her.

He moaned along with her as both of them became focused on what was to come next. “Ready to give me some pleasure back, Gothy?”

“Take me, Hero, use me,” Becky pleaded softly as her hips shifted to grind into his. “I want you to fill me again.”

Nothing more needed to be said, so he began to take her. He did his best to focus on what he wanted to do, and not the sensations of her snug tunnel gripping his manhood. He went slow, watching her for cues as he tried different angles of penetration.

She rode the pleasure, cresting again and again. She was in heaven, no man she had been with had spent so long trying to bring her to such levels of pleasure like Alvin was right now.

Once he found the angle she liked best he began to increase his pace. His breathing becoming ragged as he struggled to hold back his own

pending release. “Not,” he panted, “not going to last much longer.”

“Good,” Becky husked back at him. “Give it to me. Fill me again Hero, claim my body as yours, please.”

That was all he needed to hear as he began to frantically hammer into her. His mind went fuzzy as his own orgasm finally washed through him. He grunted as he hammered her for another minute after the last drop filled her body. Panting, his arms trembled as he held himself aloft above her own quivering body.

“How did I do this time?” Alvin asked as he dropped onto the bed next to her.

“You claimed the top spot…” Becky replied, her voice dropped to a whisper, “like you have me.”

“Gothy?” He waited until she looked up through her lashes at him. “Will you be the crazy sociopath who sticks with me, like Harley did with the Joker?”

Her eyes opened wide, her mouth dropping open in surprise, “I thought I was the only one thinking that.” She climbed on top of him and kissed him repeatedly. When she finally stopped she met his eyes, as if searching for something in his. “You mean it?”

“You don’t panic, you fuck like a mynx, you promised to always have my back. And you have proven that you will. You patched me up without batting an eye when my leg was torn off, and that wasn’t just a flesh wound. So yes, I mean it.” He caressed her face gently, “Will you?”

“I’m broken, you know that. You killed my dad in front of me, to protect me, just the other day and here I am fucking you three times in the same day. I’ve been scarred in ways I can’t talk about. I’m not stable, don’t think I am, but if you will accept me then, fuck yes. I’ll be your Harley if you’ll be my Joker, but I’m going to call you Hero instead.”

He tangled a hand in her hair and pulled her down sharply, kissing her roughly. After a moment, he broke the kiss and met her eyes, “We are both flawed, broken people, but we know it. Others won’t understand us, not really, but we can understand each other. Now get off, we need to get dinner.”

She ground her hips against his, “It’ll take me a minute to get off, but if you want to help…” Her laughter as he rolled his eyes was bright and pure. She froze at the sound of her own laughter, a shiver running through her, “I didn’t think I would feel that emotion again.”

“Joy?” he asked as he rolled her over. She nodded, her face shifting expression as she tried to come to terms with something. He leaned over, making her focus on him, “I felt it earlier. It’s been years, and I was uncertain of what it was, but I know now. With you it feels right.” He rolled off the bed and stretched, “Quick shower, then food.”

Becky lay there watching him, feeling the same warmth in her chest that he had earlier. “Because of you?”

He met her eyes, “Because of you.”

She got up languidly, “Am I just the love interest in your game? Or is this real?”

“I can ask Jarvis if you want me to. Frankly, I’m going to go with real. The people running this were absolutely fine with the zombies eating me within the first five minutes after I woke up. If you are ‘just being my love interest’, expect me to jam the ‘have sex’ button every damn time.”

Lips pursed, she nodded, “Good. You scrub my back, I’ll scrub all of you.”

“Deal, Gothy,” he took her hand and tugged her after him into the bathroom.

Chapter Twenty-Four

When they finally left the Inn, they discovered most of the Settlement residents gathered near the gates. Three buses were pulling through the gates. Alvin walked over to Susan and Bill, “Any ideas?”

“They showed up down the road and sent one person forward to ask if they could stop for the night. It seems I-70 is kind of fucked and they’re looking for a detour,” Bill informed him.

“We plan to see how many we can convince to stay, which means I’ll need to get more rooms built tomorrow.” Susan added, stepping forward as the bus doors opened, “Welcome to Wild Bill’s Holdout. We are a functioning Settlement, and if you don’t know what that means, we can help explain what’s happening in the world. Dinner will be in an hour or so once I know how many of you there are.”

Alvin recognized the man who stepped out of the first bus. Randy nodded at Susan, “We’re looking for shelter for the night, but we’ll gladly accept dinner along with it. We have about sixty people, about a third of them are teens.”

“Randy, what happened to the drug dealer, the addict and their friend?” Alvin called out to him.

Head snapping around to Alvin, Randy’s mouth fell open, “You’re with them?”

“I’m the one who got this Settlement started. It’s turning out that the world is even more gamey than I had thought. What happened to the trio of trouble?”

“Cody Carter, Kyle Smith and Ava Silca all died in a night attack. They opted to sleep in the jeep, and the zombies killed them. We killed the

zombies, including them as they stood back up. It was bad," Randy shook his head.

"No big loss," Alvin snorted. "Well, go ahead and offload. We don't have room for you all in the buildings, but we can by tomorrow night for those that want to stay. Susan and Bill will fill you in on how things work around here."

Randy nodded as he turned to the other buses and made a come along motion. The other bus doors opened and people began to pour out of them. One of the buses was full of teenagers, twenty in total along with a single teacher. The second bus carried Japanese tourists. The Val-mart crowd occupied the first bus, which Alvin remembered from the mission.

The people from Val-mart stared at Alvin in surprise as they recognized him. "Welcome to safety, folks. It's been awhile." He looked at the ragged man who had the damaged arm, "How's the arm?"

"Bad," the man winced. "I think it's getting infected."

"Take the shirt off," Alvin said as he stepped forward, pulling out one of his medkits. "Everyone, pay attention. This is one of the ways your world has changed." He waited until he had an audience as the guy with the child at his side took off his shirt, showing the bandage. "Unwrap it, we have nurses who can look at it."

Barbara stepped forward with shears, snipping off the bandage. It fell away to reveal a ragged wound oozing pus. "Yep, that's infected. We can clean it out and apply anti-biotics."

"No need," Alvin said as he held up the medkit. "This is a medkit. You'll be able to buy them from the Medical Unit once it's built. It will heal any single body part it's placed on." He pulled the backing off and slapped it to the man's forearm just above the wound.

He watched as the bite pulsed, the pus spurting from the wound before the missing muscle began to reappear, followed by fresh skin that

closed over the wound. Exclamations of wonder could be heard, even from those that had been in the Settlement for a while. The small girl cried as she hugged her father. He knelt and hugged his little girl back.

“That should help some of you understand. Those of us who have been here for a while can help fill you in. How’s the arm?”

The man looked up from where he was hugging his daughter, “It feels good, no more pain. Thank you. Joanna was so worried about me.”

“What’s your name?”

“Justin Brand, sir. Thank you. If there is anything, anything at all I can do for you, just name it and I will.”

“Thank you for saving my Daddy again,” Joanna sniffled as she continued to hold her father.

“It was my pleasure, kid,” he replied. He looked around, noticing that Susan and Betty had vanished, and guessed they were getting food prepared. “If you’d all like a quick tour, we should have enough time before dinner to show you all around. James, Bill, David, can I get some help splitting them up into manageable groups?”

For the next hour they showed the newcomers around, explaining things. They gave a demonstration of the guns as well, which caused a major stir as people now saw salvation in reach.

Susan came out to announce dinner. “We have enough dinnerware for twenty people right now. That means we’ll need to eat in shifts. Line up and we’ll get you all fed. There’s plenty of food, it’s just plates and bowls we don’t have enough of. If you don’t want stew, or don’t want to wait we can do sandwiches for you.”

A dozen people opted for sandwiches. Betty retreated and came back with a tray of sandwiches for them as the first twenty people filed

inside for stew. Alvin leaned back against the building, his eyes closed. He smiled when a warm hand covered his, “What do you need, Gothy?”

“Who’s Gothy?” was the reply, which made his eyes snap open. Claudia stood in front of him with a knowing smile, “All of this is all thanks to you, right? I’m definitely going to stay, then.”

“Dia? How did you end up here?”

“The beetle broke down, Randy came by and picked me up. Cody tried to get me to sleep in the Jeep with them. I’m so glad I didn’t.”

“No shit,” Alvin chuckled. “You been okay?”

“Randy has been decent enough, but I never got to really thank you for saving me.”

“Who’s the blonde?” Gothy asked as she came towards them, her eyes narrowed slightly.

“Dia, this is Gothy. Gothy, this is Dia. I rescued her from the hospital.”

“She the one the director was raping?” Gothy asked bluntly.

Alvin replied with a shrug, “Yup.”

Dia eyed Becky before turning to Alvin, “She’s with you?”

“Yes,” Alvin replied simply. “So, you’ve attached yourself to Randy? That’s not a bad choice.”

Lips pursed, Dia sighed, “I had. When I saw you I had thought maybe I was going to get to upgrade. Seems maybe that won’t be quite as easy as I had hoped.”

Becky smirked at her, “Sorry, MY Hero is taken. I don’t think you could handle what he likes anyway.”

Dia glared at Becky, her voice waspish, “The chubby teenaged goth girl really thinks she’s better than me?”

“Without a doubt,” Becky snickered. “You’d probably just lay there like a dead fish. Hero likes a woman with fire who demands to be taken.”

Alvin rubbed his face as the two squared off. “Ladies,” his voice was soft but it held an edge, “stop it.”

Becky glanced at him before she stepped to his side and took his arm. “Fine, but she needs to know her place. I’m your woman, best she can hope for is side bitch”

Dia glanced from Becky to Alvin, her lips twisted up slightly. “I’ll stop. For now. But if you decide you want a real woman instead of this pudgy girl, let me know.” Spinning on her heel, Dia swayed away.

“Oh, I so want to fuck her up,” Becky growled under her breath, her fingers digging into Alvin’s arm.

Grimacing at the fingers digging into him, he pushed her against the wall and kissed her. It got her to let go of his arm. Instead, she grabbed his shirt and pulled him tight to her as they kissed. Eventually, the kiss broke and he stepped back, “No high school bullshit, got it? You are my woman, period. She wouldn’t be able to do everything you do. She’d probably panic if I lost a limb and would let me die. So, while she might think she can compete, she can’t.”

Becky kept eye contact the whole time, finally nodding. “Good.” Fear flickered across her face for a brief second, “I just...”

“Stop,” he said, pinning her to the wall with one arm across her chest. “She is fuckable, and yes, she probably will try something to break us up. You need to understand this, and never question it. You are mine now. I

am yours. We're two pieces of the same broken whole. She will not be going with us. Us. Do you understand?"

She squirmed slightly as he held her there, her lips parting slightly, "Promise?"

He chuckled as shifted to pin her in place with his body instead of just his arm. "Promise, Gothy. Me and you will be going out into the world. I wouldn't have anyone else at my side." He kissed her nose, earning a look of contempt from her. "Good, there's the spirit I like to see."

She grabbed him and spun him into the wall, surprising him as she kissing him passionately. Abruptly, she let him go and walked away, "Glad to hear it."

Once everyone had been fed, James took his guitar over to the Inn. One of the teens joined him with her flute. Another one joined with an alto sax. Soon, there were a dozen kids playing along with him. The teens had been a school band on a trip when the apocalypse happened. Some of them vowed never to touch their instruments again, blaming the band trip for being separated from their families.

James let the teens each walk him through a song they knew, and he taught them the classic rock he knew. The winner of the night was the second rendition of Blind Willie McTell, the flute and sax perfect for the lamenting tune, really making it more poignant.

People started heading off to bed, many of the newcomers returning to their buses to sleep since not many of them wanted to spend XP on rooms at the Inn and the bunker was filled to maximum capacity, with some people even bedding down in the main room. Most of the people from the Colorado Expeditions took rooms in the inn, since they'd all earned enough XP to afford the basic rooms from working in the Settlement.

As people were heading off to their sleeping arrangements, Alvin felt Claudia's eyes on him. She watched him while he took Becky's hand

and went up to their room. He shook his head in bemusement. He was far from the best-looking guy in the compound.

Plenty of guys had been making advances toward Claudia, as well as the other available women. He hadn't gotten any extra looks from any of the other women.

Once back in the room Becky started stripping. She stopped when she noticed his distant look. "Al?"

Blinking, he looked at his topless lover, a smile coming to his face. "Sorry, Gothy, was lost in thought. I need to go back to my cell for a bit, see what all these extra bodies did for us and a few other things. Susan was late, working at the table. Apparently we'll be keeping them all. That means I should have a substantial XP boost waiting for me. I also need to replace my medical supplies."

She frowned as she finished stripping, sprawling out on the bed. "I can't go with, can I?"

"No," He joined her on the bed, still dressed. "I'll be back in a bit. Maybe I'll have something when I return."

She eyed him before latching onto his body, using him as a body pillow. "I'll wait, for a bit. If you don't hurry back maybe I'll have to go find someone to keep me company."

Laughing, he shook his head, "Only if it's Dia."

Sticking her tongue out, Becky disagreed, "No, thanks. That little bitch couldn't handle all the woman I am."

"I would love to see you taking her though, Gothy. You bending her to your twisted desires? Yum."

Becky giggled, "Well, when you put it that way…"

“Besides, we have to share. Remember?”

“Yeah, I know. Now get going so we can refresh our acquaintance. When you get back I plan on riding you for a long, long time.” She straddled him, hips grinding gently. “Hmm, the thought makes me want it now.”

Alvin pulled her to him, holding her still, “Be back shortly-ish.” He vanished in a bright flash, spilling Becky to the bed.

Appearing in his cell on his bunk, Alvin adjusted his tight pants. “Gods, she is a crazy woman.”

“You seem quite suited for each other,” Jarvis replied dryly.

“How am I doing, Jarvis?”

“Very well, sir. You’re making excellent progress with the Settlement. I think you may be pleasantly surprised by your summary. Also, thank you in advance, sir.”

Laughing, Alvin pulled open the Summary with a pretty good idea of where he stood.

World Mode Summary
Total Experience Earned: 65,530 XP
Breakdown: Mutated insect killed 200 XP, Stockpile loot 2,330 XP, Setter bonus 61,000 XP, Viewer bonus 2,000 XP

He opened his character screen to see his total XP. Between the left over XP from before and this he had a total of 71,495 XP. He whistled. “Okay, Jarvis, looks like you’re going to get your wish. I need to talk to Bill about a different gun for the rest of it.”

“I should point out sir, that you will receive 5% of all XP that anyone spends in the store which the Hologram AI Power allows them to access. That will add up, until people have access to more than just the

Medical Unit. Upgrades will not yet be available to Settlers but can be unlocked with upgrades to the Hologram AI Power."

"At least I'll make back some of what I spend on you," Alvin chuckled as he spent 50,000 XP to purchase the Hologram AI Power. "I'm going back to have fun with Gothy. You can introduce yourself around."

"Yes, sir," Jarvis sounded eager as the light flared around Alvin.

He appeared next to Becky, who was laying on her side, "Welcome back, Hero."

"Gothy," he slid closer and kissed her, "would you like to spend some of your XP?"

Her eyes widened slightly, "How do I do it?"

"Jarvis?"

Jarvis appeared standing beside the bed in a small flash of blue light. He appeared as an elderly gentleman, dressed in a very old fashioned butler's uniform. His form was blue tinted and partially transparent. "How may I assist you, sir?"

"Gothy, this is Jarvis, my AI handler. Jarvis, this is Gothy, my crazy lover. She wants to look over the store."

"It is my pleasure to serve," Jarvis turned to the naked Becky, who hadn't even attempted to cover up. "Miss, it is a pleasure to meet you. This interface will allow you to access the store. I must stay with you until you are done." He handed over a holographic blue glowing pad, that acted as if it was solid as her hands seemed to contact it.

Becky took it excitedly and started browsing through the options. "So much to look at."

Alvin kissed her cheek, “While you do that I’m going to go see Bill about getting some different guns.”

“See you soon,” she replied, not pulling her eyes from the screen.

He walked out of the room, chuckling at how eager she had been to get access to the store. He was curious about what she would buy. He trotted out of the Inn and through the yard to the bunker.

He passed a few people who were waiting to use the showers. He found Bill in the main room with Betty curled up in his lap, “Bill, was hoping to catch you. Wanted to see about changing up my gun.”

Bill sighed as he set Betty on her feet, “Sure, follow me.”

Betty frowned at Alvin. He shrugged at her, “I’ll give him back shortly.”

He followed Bill into the master bedroom. Shutting and locking the door behind them, Bill walked to the back wall and hit a switch. The wall slid away, revealing a hall. Bill started down it, looking back to make sure Alvin was with him.

“How are you going to figure out which gun you want? Going to take them with you again?”

Grinning, Alvin shook his head, “Just wait for it.”

The hall ended at a metal door that wouldn’t have seemed out of place in a bank vault. Bill spun the giant wheel and moved the massive door aside. The room beyond it was huge, the walls covered in racks. Hundreds of guns occupied the racks, which still left almost half of them empty. Several large tables occupied the center of the room. “We’ve been bringing all the guns we recover in town here, as well as Frank’s collection and mine. When we get enough of them upgraded, we’ll issue one to everybody in the Settlement. Pick out what you want.”

Alvin pulled his M14 from his backpack, “Trade you this for another one as well. It has the ammo and durability upgrades plus lower recoil.”

“Fine. Pick out three that you like. I know Becky needs a second one besides the shotgun. Especially if we meet more of those scorpions.”

Alvin walked down the closest wall for a second before he sighed. “Jarvis, I need you.”

Jarvis appeared beside him in a flash of blue light, exactly as he had in the Inn room. “You called, sir?”

Bill had his 1911 out and aimed at the hologram, “What the fuck?”

“Bill, this is Jarvis, my helper AI. Jarvis this is Bill. Jarvis gives people here access to the store. He can also identify items, so we know how many upgrade slots they have among other things. I can use him to upgrade stuff, but you guys won’t have that available at the moment.”

Bill frowned at the hologram, but holstered his weapon, “Why not?”

Jarvis answered him, his tone dry and precise, “You need to upgrade the buildings you have available. Once that is done, you will gain the ability to upgrade gear and stats associated with that building. I do not make the rules, I only follow them.”

“Jarvis, I need all these Identified,” Alvin waved his hand at the room.

Spinning in a slow circle, Jarvis nodded, “Done. If you don’t mind, sir, the lady is upset that I vanished so abruptly. That removed her access to the store, and she was not done shopping. With your permission?”

“Fuck, yes, go,” Alvin winced. When Jarvis vanished Alvin sighed, “Right, he can only be in one place at a time I guess.”

Bill was examining the guns, “They all have status screens now.”

“Good. Let’s sort them by rarity, shall we?”

“Good idea,” Bill grunted as he looked over the room. “Legendary on the left side when entering and then going down the scale to trash on the right?”

“We can do that,” Alvin said, starting at one end of a rack and moving the guns into the middle of the room. “Maybe we need to grab a few others to help make this go faster?”

“I’ll be back,” Bill grunted as he left.

Alvin looked after him for a moment, then picked up an AK-47. Looking closer, he discovered it was actually a Type 56, the Chinese variant of the weapon. It was rare quality and in good condition. Even without any upgrades applied to it, it fired better ammo than the 1911 did. Alvin tucked the gun into his backpack then resumed taking guns off the racks, setting them on the tables.

Bill came back a few minutes later with Frank, James and David. He explained the rarity system and how they wanted to distribute the guns. A couple of hours later, all of the guns were back on racks arranged by rarity. There weren’t any legendary guns in the collection, but Alvin didn’t find that surprising, really. In the end, a bit over half of the collection turned out to be common quality. There were several dozen rare guns, even more uncommon and two trash quality weapons as well. Bill set aside the two trash quality guns to be used as training guns to help people with target practice.

“Okay, Al, pick what you want.” Bill told Alvin. He turned to the others. “We can’t upgrade them ourselves yet. Once we can, we’ll all be pulling two weapons, one pistol and one long gun.”

Frank nodded, “Communal? We going to outfit the others?”

“Once we get all these upgraded, yes, but we will come first. If you want to tag two of them now, go ahead.”

Alvin didn’t pay them much attention as he pulled down a 357 Magnum Desert Eagle. Nodding, he dropped it into his bag. It was rare, which would let him tweak it. He went through the 1911s, looking for one for Becky. He finally found an uncommon one that he stuck into his bag as well.

“Got them,” Alvin told him.

“That was just two pistols,” Bill said.

“Took the Type 56, too, when you went to grab them,” Alvin said, hooking a thumb at the others.

“Huh. It’s a good choice. I picked it up in ‘Nam, so treat it right. I notice there’s a huge jump in damage once you get up to the rifles. I think those or shotguns might be the only real bet against things like that scorpion.”

“That’s my thought, too,” Alvin agreed. “Well, time to go see if Becky’s done shopping. I’ll send Jarvis to you once she is.”

“Thanks,” Bill shook his hand before turning him loose. “Is she holding up okay, with her dad and all?”

“She’s dealing with it,” Alvin said simply, not seeing any need to air dirty laundry. “We’ll work through it.”

“See you in the morning, then,” Bill turned back to the rifles as Alvin left.

As he crossed the yard to the Inn, Claudia caught up to him. “Alvin?”

He paused, “What’s up, Dia?”

“Are you free for a minute?”

“I need to get some sleep. Can it wait til morning?”

“That’s what I wanted to talk about,” Dia said as she moved a little closer to him. “The bus is a bit uncomfortable. Why not send your little groupie away for the night? I would be grateful for a comfortable bed.” She licked her lips suggestively as she smiled at him.

“Thought you were with Randy, isn’t he going to mind?”

“Tsk, he’ll deal with it. Maybe you can send your teenybopper to him. Goodness knows he doesn’t appreciate my skills. I imagine she would be perfect for him.”

Laughing, Alvin shook his head, “Sorry, Dia. I don’t mind the idea of a tumble with you, but it’s not going to happen tonight.”

She put her hand on his chest, “Think about it, Al. Think ‘long and hard’ about it, hmm? I will guarantee you’ve never had what I can bring to the table.”

“Is that how you got your boss?” he asked without heat, just curious.

Her face went white then red, “He was trying to rape me when you found us, if you’ll recall.”

“That time, sure. What about the other times?”

She looked away, “Fine. Yes, I fuck men to get what I want. Is that wrong? God made me like this, after all. Why not use it to my advantage?”

“No reason at all. I’m just not interested right now. Tell you what, talk to Gothy. She might agree to share.”

“Share? With little miss roly-poly? You have got to be fucking kidding me.” Her face was twisted with distaste and scorn.

“Okay, that is enough,” Alvin said with a friendly smile. “If you insult her one more time, we are not going to be having any more cordial talks.”

“Seriously?” She scoffed, believing he must be joking.

He let his light-hearted façade drop away, “Seriously. Now back the fuck off me, or things will not be nice.” His face had gone expressionless, his eyes frozen pools that reflected his seriousness.

Dia backed away from him, her hands up, “You are fucking crazy. I make men beg for more. What can she possibly bring that I can’t do better?”

“You want a fair chance?”

Her eyes lit up, “Yes. That’s all I’m asking for. That’s all I need.”

“Fine. You can come out with us tomorrow. I lost a leg today, so it should be perfectly safe for you.”

“A leg?” Dia looked skeptical.

“Medkits, remember? Gothy didn’t panic when it happened. She put a tourniquet on me then got the kit on to regrow my leg. Then she turned around and shoved her gun right up the ass of the scorp and gave it a lead enema with the all the rounds she had.” He let a manic grin creep over his face, “Feel up to something like that?”

Dia backed away, “You’re fucking nuts.”

“Agreed. Goodnight, Claudia.” He brushed past her and into the Inn. Internally he sighed, wondering just how upset Becky would have been with him if he had gotten just a small sample of Dia’s skills.

When he entered the room, Becky was on the bed, still naked with the pad in her hands. “Did little miss thing accost you?” she asked without even glancing away from the pad.

“Yes,” Alvin said as he crossed to the bed and sat down. “I told her I would give her an equal chance at me.”

Becky lowered the pad to look at him skeptically, “Really?”

“Yeah. Told her she could go with us outside the walls tomorrow. She declined rather quickly after I told her about the last time out.”

Eyes sparkling, she twisted around on the bed to rest her head on his legs. “Devious. Nicely done, Hero.”

“Thanks. How mad would you have been if I had let her?”

“Pretty miffed. Sharing is caring, remember?”

Laughing, Alvin looked down at her smirk, “God damn it, you really are my kind of crazy.”

“Yeah, isn’t it great? Now where did you run off to that you took the store away from me?”

“Switching out weapons. I still need to upgrade them as well. You’re getting a handgun to go with the shotgun, which I also need from you.”

“It’s next to the door,” she said, lifting her head so he could stand.

“I’ll be back in a bit, then. Guess we’ll find out if Jarvis leaves when I do.”

“He damn well better not,” she muttered as she continued flipping through the store.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Alvin appeared in his cell, sitting on his bunk. He pulled out the guns and looked them over.

Remington 870 Police (Uncommon)
Damage: 50 (Decreases with range)
Durability: 310/400
Ammo type: 00 Buck
Upgradable: 2/4

S&W 1911 (Uncommon)
Damage: 8
Durability: 216/250
Ammo type: .45 ACP
Upgradable: 0/4

IMI Desert Eagle .357 Magnum (Rare)
Damage: 11
Durability: 182/200
Ammo type: .357 Magnum
Upgradable: 0/6

Type 56 (Rare)
Damage: 25
Durability: 619/1000
Ammo type: 7.62x39 mm
Upgradable: 0/6

Humming to himself, Alvin picked up the shotgun first. “Jarvis?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Are you here and there?”

“That is correct, sir. My hologram may only appear in one place within the Settlement at a time until you upgrade the Hologram AI Power. However, I am permitted to be both here and there.”

“So you’re going to become an XP sink, eh?” Alvin asked as he pulled up the store.

“There are several options that can be applied, sir. I would recommend purchasing the Merchant upgrade at some point, as it allows your Settlers access to all available upgrades. However, I do not believe that or the other upgrades available to me to be a matter of any particular urgency at the current time.”

“Sounds good, but it probably costs another 50,000, so skip for now.”

“Understood, sir,” Jarvis replied.

Alvin spent some time upgrading the guns to his satisfaction, then purchased two medkits and two regrowth potions. That left him with 9,245 XP. He decided not spend it for the time being.

Remington 870 Police (Uncommon)
Damage: 50 (Decreases with range)
Durability: 1910/2000
Ammo type: Slug (Jacketed)
Upgradable: 3/4

S&W 1911 (Uncommon)
Damage: 8
Durability: 1216/1250
Ammo type: .45 ACP (Jacketed)
Upgradable: 3/4

IMI Desert Eagle .357 Magnum (Rare)
Damage: 11

Durability: 982/1000
Ammo type: .357 Magnum (Jacketed)
Upgradable: 3/6

Type 56 (Rare)
Damage: 25
Durability: 4619/5000
Ammo type: 7.62x39 mm (Jacketed)
Upgradable: 3/6

Alvin stowed the guns and medical supplies in his bag and stretched. “Well, that should help when we run into any more giant scorpions. Need to grab some of Gothy’s clothes to upgrade, too.”

“She is still browsing the store, sir. She seems intent on examining every item for sale.”

“She’s smarter than I am, then,” Alvin snorted. “I really need to find the time to do that, myself. Heading back, Jarvis. See you on the flipside.”

Gothy lay propped against the headboard, still intent on the store pad when Alvin reappeared. She looked up and smiled at him. “Your shotgun and pistol will be by the door, Gothy,” he told her.

“Understood. Have you seen how much shit there is that can be purchased?”

“Haven’t looked over it all yet. Do you have a leather jacket?”

“In my bag,” she replied, her eyes returning to the pad. “Why?”

“Jarvis, identify her clothes for me, please,” Alvin said as he opened her bag.

“Done, sir,” Jarvis replied after a second.

Alvin began to dig through her clothes, whistling appreciatively at some of her under garments. “Damn, you are kinked.”

“Stop drooling on my things. If you have time to do that, you can drool on me instead.”

He glanced back to see her still focused on the store. “I think you wouldn’t appreciate my talents right now. Besides, I found what I was looking for.” He stood up with a shirt, pair of jeans and leather jacket in hand. “I’ll be right back.”

She looked up just as he vanished. “I think he’s trying to make sure I survive longer,” she mumbled.

“He is indeed, miss,” Jarvis told her.

Becky smiled at that, “Good. It’s nice to be wanted, for once.”

Alvin was back with her clothes in just a few minutes. “Here you go. Wear these whenever we go outside the walls.” Alvin draped her clothes over her bag. “They each have upgraded armor and durability now. They’ll give you as much protection as my clothes do me. Still need to find you a hat or something.”

“I’ll check the clothes the loot team’s brought back in the morning.” She looked over at him, “It’s going to be an hour or so until I finish with this. After that I can show you just how much I like the gifts.”

Chuckling, he stripped off his own clothing and joined her in bed. She cuddled up next to him as soon as he did. “So, the store is more interesting than a naked me?”

“No, but if we know everything that’s available than we can make better decisions later. It might mean a better chance to survive longer. And I want us to survive a very long time.”

“I have three medkits and two regrowth potions in my bag. I’ll hand one of each to you in the morning. Your guns now pierce armor, so the bugs should be less of a problem. Your clothing now gives you some armor. No dying on me, Gothy.”

“Not going to, Hero,” she murmured into his chest, kissing it idly. “So much of the stuff here is useless garbage meant to trap the stupid or unwary.”

“Yeah, I figured as much. Jarvis, anything she deems useless please put into a separate tab and label it junk.” Alvin told the AI as he tapped the sleep icon so he would stay here for the night.

“As you wish, sir,” Jarvis replied from beside the bed.

“Make sure to grab all the ones from earlier, too,” she added.

“It has been done, miss,” Jarvis replied.

“I do love the pragmatic side of you, Gothy,” Alvin commented as he gently stroked her back. “Another reason you’re always going to be with me.”

“Thank you,” she replied, kissing his chest again.

Silence dominated the room for some time after that. When she finished she dropped the pad off the edge of the bed, it vanished before it reached the floor. She’d only purchased one item, so she still had plenty of XP to spend, but she would do it later. She stretched, then looked up at Alvin with mischief in her eyes. He was sound asleep, his arms still around her.

“All tired out?” Gothy whispered as she slipped from the bed, turning off the lights before crawling back into bed with him. Her naked body pressed back against his gently so as to not wake him. “Night, Hero.”

~ ~ ~

Alvin mumbled as he woke slowly, only to find that the pleasant dream he'd been having was even better awake. The pleasure coursing through him was what woke him. Opening his eyes, he looked up to see Becky riding him, her hips rocking slowly and rhythmically against him. "Gothy, this is a nice way to wake up."

She leaned down to kiss him briefly before she sat back upright. Her hips began to rock faster, "I was waiting for you to wake. Now that you finally are, I can go wild." Suiting her words to actions, she began to hammer herself onto his rigid shaft. "It was so 'hard' not to wake you, getting to this point," she panted.

He grabbed her hips and helped her go faster, harder and deeper. "Next time wake me," he grunted as he felt himself already near the edge. "I would have enjoyed it as much as you did."

She looked down at him, raking his chest lightly with her nails, "You fell asleep on me last night." She began to shake, "This is payback. Fuck." With that last word, her passage clamped down like a vise on him as her orgasm started.

"Oh gods," Alvin moaned as he felt her walls beginning to milk him, pushing him over the edge as well. He felt his seed coating her tight walls, his hips still hammering at her for a few more seconds before he shuddered and fell back, still inside her.

Panting, Becky fell forward onto his chest, nibbling at his lips. "There. Next time maybe you won't fall asleep on me while I'm doing research."

Chuckling, Alvin kissed her, "I don't know, I think this was a great way to wake up. Maybe your idea is flawed."

She met his eyes, "Think of how much better it would have been if you'd been awake for the whole thing."

His flagging cock stirred at her words, “Point taken, Gothy.”

“Good,” she slid onto the bed next to him, one arm and leg still draped over him. “Now, about what we should be doing. Are we going to stay here for a bit longer or are we heading out right away?”

“A bit longer at least. I want to get the main road cleared, and put up signs directing people to the Settlement at least.”

“We agree then,” she murmured, lightly kissing his chest. “There are ready made signs in the store. But if you wait until the general store gets built, you can use Settlement XP to buy them.”

“You make a good point there,” he replied as he stroked her hair. “Today will be like yesterday, but we should be able to take both trucks. The more people we can get outside the walls working to clear the town, the faster it’ll go.”

“They’ll need to upgrade more guns for that,” Becky reminded him. “Maybe mention that to Susan, so she can get that building going today.”

“I think this relationship is already paying dividends,” Alvin told her, kissing the top of her head.

“You do realize that birth control pills are going to be in short supply?” Becky brought up out of left field. Alvin’s eyes went wide, a burst of panic driving all thought out of his mind. Becky started laughing at his expression, “I still have a few weeks worth left, and there’s an item in the store that prevents pregnancy and STD’s for up to a year. It only cost a grand, and now we don’t have to worry about accidents.”

With a sigh of relief he rolled her onto her back and pinned her down. “You little bitch,” he mock growled at her, “trying to give me a heart attack.”

She stuck her tongue out at him, “Yup. It’s also a reminder that fucking anyone other than me might give you a surprise nine months later.”

He got out of bed, “Point, set, and match, Gothy. Let’s get cleaned up and head over for breakfast.”

“I like the way you think, Hero.”

Claudia glared at them as they went through the Inn’s main room. Randy stood next to her, also giving him the stink eye. Rolling his eyes, Alvin took Gothy’s arm. He leaned in slightly and spoke softly. “Claudia is going to be an annoyance I think.”

“Want me to put her in her place? Like I told you, I kind of like breaking the thin ones.”

“Not yet. Maybe she’ll decide to focus on other people,” Alvin said, doubting it even as he said it.

“Right, sure,” Becky snorted, clearly sharing the same doubt.

After breakfast, which was just oatmeal, Alvin took Susan aside to find out what all she had going for the Settlement. “With the XP we got from the new people joining, I was able to start each of the craft buildings. The turrets are dual barrel and fire .45 ACP ammo to start. They can be upgraded to improve target recognition as well as the caliber of the guns.” She leaned against the wall, shaking her head, “Everything takes XP and every upgrade costs more than the last one.”

“Figures. This system is designed to force people to make choices, especially early on.” Alvin chewed his lip as he considered all the options. “I think getting all the basics up is the way to go. Once that’s all set up and the roads in town cleared I was thinking of heading out to find more people and direct them this way.”

“Dangerous if things keep changing, like that scorpion.”

“Becky’s going with me, so I’ll have back-up.”

“She…” Susan paused, clearly choosing her words with care. “She seems a little… different.”

Snorting, Alvin shook his head, “She isn’t normal is what you’re trying to say. She isn’t, but neither am I. Better if we go out. Should cause less issues in the long run that way.”

“Okay,” Susan looked over at the guy in the kitchen with them, who was busy chopping vegetables. “Glad one of the tourists was a cook. I need to set everyone up with jobs today. I’ll be keeping the teens inside the walls building things for now.”

“Works. If enough people are willing to go out, see if any of them can drive a tow truck, or knows how to hook. I want to set up a bypass around I-70 and get Main Street at least cleared before I head out into the world.”

Nodding, Susan headed out. Alvin walked over to the Japanese man who had been preparing vegetables. “How did you sleep last night?”

“Better than any night since the Event,” the cook replied, a slight accent coloring his words. “On behalf of our entire group, you have our thanks.” Turning to face Alvin, the man bowed at the waist.

“Glad you all made it here,” Alvin replied. “Do you think the JSDF will have been able to save many of the citizens?”

“God willing,” the man replied as he went back to work. “My nephew is JSDF. He was in Osaka. I pray he survived the Event, though part of me hopes that he was one of those taken by God so he does not have to endure this.”

“Understandable. I hope you all can help this place grow and thrive. If you will excuse me, I need to get to work myself.”

“Sayonara,” the cook said as Alvin walked away.

He was looking for Becky, but changed direction when he saw Bill and Randy having what was clearly a disagreement. He headed that way.

“Look, all I’m saying is that we might need to think about who should really be in charge of this place. This tidy little dictatorship you have set up just ain’t right, man. I got people out of Provo, found even more people and brought them all here.” Randy motioned around at the people who’d gathered around to listen to the conversation.

“This is my place,” Bill snorted. “If you want to leave and try to find another place to set up a Settlement, you are free to go. As well as anyone who wants to go with you. But, Alvin is the only person I know who can get one started that has all the benefits we do.”

“Yeah, uh huh, the guy preying on the teenage girl. I heard he killed her father in cold blood. Does that seem like the kind of person we should listen to?”

Bill’s eyes narrowed, “You want to run this place?”

“I could probably do better than the stacked redhead. I mean yeah she looks good…”

Bill’s fist drove into Randy’s gut, driving the air out of his lungs and doubling him over. “That is my daughter, so mind your manners.” He looked around at the others, who all froze under his gaze, “Listen up, ya’ll. This is my home. I have opened it to you all so we have a chance to survive this bullshit apocalypse. It is, however, still my home. Susan is the Overseer, and I can’t think of anyone better suited to the job. Anyone else want to dispute that or offer commentary on her figure?”

No one else stepped forward, so Bill grunted. “Then get going. Susan’s looking for people willing to face the dangers outside the walls.” As people began to scatter, Bill reached down and pulled Randy to his feet. “Now look here, son, I don’t have any beef with you right now. Just keep it civil and don’t try that shit again. If you do, it will be much worse next time. Understood?”

Randy wheezed, “Yeah, I got you.”

Alvin stepped away, following others as he looked for Becky. Frowning, he wondered where she had gotten to, “Jarvis, do you know where Gothy is?”

Appearing next to him, Jarvis nodded, “She is in the Chemical Plant, sir. Claudia is with her.”

“Fuck,” Alvin hurried toward the building. Inside, he found Claudia on the ground with Becky standing over her. “Everything okay in here?”

Smiling, Becky met his gaze as she stepped away from Claudia. “Of course. I was just explaining things to little miss thing.”

His eyes dropped to Claudia, who was not moving. One of her eyes was starting to darken. “How are your hands, Gothy?” He took her hands, examining them. Her left hand had a small cut. “Hurt that one.”

“It will heal. Now maybe she’ll learn that trying to get a rise out of me is a bad idea. Especially when she succeeds.” Becky’s smile was vulpine.

“Works. But if it doesn’t, then what?”

“I’ll hurt her worse,” Becky shrugged. “She apparently isn’t fond of pain, so it should work.”

Kissing her hurt hand, Alvin chuckled. “Nut.” He dropped her hands to kneel down next to Claudia. He tapped her bruising cheek, “Dia, wake up.”

Groaning, Claudia stirred, “Huh?”

“Warned you to be civil, didn’t I?” Alvin asked as Claudia’s eyes fluttered open. “Now you going to let it go?”

“She fucking attacked me,” Claudia mumbled as she touched her jaw and eye. “She is crazy.”

“No, she’s suited for survival in this newly fucked up world, a trait you seem to be lacking. Now, are you going to continue to try to stir shit up, or are you going to get your shit together?”

Wincing, Claudia sat up, “Fine, fuck you both. I hope you get eaten by something. Just leave me alone, you fucking psychos.”

Laughing, Alvin stood up and offered his hand to Claudia. “Eh, close enough.” She didn’t take his hand so he dropped it, “Cold shoulder it is, then. Good luck.” He walked out with Becky, leaving Claudia on the ground.

“Glad you tempered your response, Gothy.”

“I figure she deserved the chance to learn, at least once. Besides, you didn’t kill the jock-guy.”

“True enough. I might have but you were on top of him, and it might have caused trouble.”

“Same reason,” Becky replied, giving him a peck on the cheek. “About the medical stuff you got for me,” she patted a belt pouch, “I can hold them.”

“Bought a bag after breakfast, I see. Good going. Is the shotgun in there?”

“For now,” Becky replied, one hand drifting to the 1911 on her hip. “Not a lot for me to take with right now.”

“Fair enough,” he handed her a regrowth potion and medkit. “There. Now we both have one, just in case.”

“Good. I can’t have my Hero dying on me,” she replied as they walked toward the front of the yard.

Chapter Twenty-Six

At least twenty people were climbing aboard the trailer behind the rig. All of them were armed, though not all of the weapons they carried had been upgraded. Bill and five people Alvin didn't know were gathered near the tow trucks. Alvin called out to Bill as he closed the distance, "What's the plan?"

"Those two are with you, Ramone is the driver. Megumin will be hooking. They both have pistols and reloads, but they're not upgraded. You two are on guard duty."

"Won't be an issue," Alvin told him as he summoned the Mustang to him. "Our guns have armor piercing rounds now. That fucking scorp wouldn't have gotten close enough to take a leg with the firepower we have now."

Lips pursed, Bill sucked at his teeth, "Definitely need to get more of them upgraded."

"The Armory will have those upgrades," Becky added from the passenger side of the car. "I believe Susan is having the band kids working on buildings today."

"Yeah, and half of the tourists volunteered for the cleanup crew. You good?"

"It'll work," Alvin said as he climbed into the Mustang. "Let's get this done. I want to clear the main road all the way to I-70 in the next day or two."

"Sounds good," Bill replied as he walked towards the other tow truck.

Alvin got the Mustang started and drove it over to where Ramone was, rolling down his window. “Only fire if you have to. When you run out of ammo, you’re out.”

“We understand, Bill already told us,” Ramone huffed.

“Just keep me safe,” Megumin added as she met his eyes. “I trust you will, since you got us out of Val-mart.”

“He will,” Becky told her with a small smile. “My hero is the best.”

Nodding, Megumin climbed into the passenger side of the tow truck. Ramone eyed them for a moment before he got into the driver side and got it started. Alvin rolled out, looking in the rear-view to see the tow trucks and rig in a line behind him.

Becky pulled her shotgun from her bag. She rested it across her lap with the muzzle out the window. “I really do have shotgun.”

Snorting, Alvin shook his head, “Such a bad joke. Remember, even though you have slugs now, the damage still drops off over distance.”

“I know, but they also punch through armor now, so the bugs will go squish that much better.”

“Yep. Your shotgun is going to be even better than my rifle for close fighting.”

Alvin slowed as he noted movement out of Becky’s window. She brought the gun up and pumped a round into the two-headed dog that came lunging out of the shadows. Pausing to see if it would stand, they waited but it didn’t twitch. Alvin drove on down the road.

“Its weird that we haven’t found more animals before now. Now they’re coming out of the woodwork.”

“Probably getting hungry and looking for food,” Becky replied. “That cat the other day had a baby in its mouth, after all.”

“Point. I hope everyone is ready for this.”

Alvin parked the Mustang to the side when they reached the point they’d left off the previous day. Alvin and Becky got out, taking up guard positions. The tow trucks pulled up, James and David jumped off the back of Bill’s truck to join Alvin and Becky as guards while Megumin and an Asian man who’d ridden with Bill started hooking cars.

“How are you doing, David?” Alvin asked, keeping his eyes tracking for movement.

“I heard you were thinking of leaving soon,” David replied, not answering the question.

“Once we get the road cleared and get signage up telling people that safety is nearby. I’m going to head out and see how fucked the rest of the country is.”

“Are you going towards Nevada?” James asked quickly.

“I hadn’t decided which way to go yet. Any reason why you ask?” Alvin queried.

“My family lives in a small town out past Vegas. They might have survived the Apocalypse. If you head that way, I hope you’ll check on them.”

“What makes you think they would be okay?”

“They were friends with a lot of the retired military and the survivalists in the town. Lots of times those were the same people. Dad had a way of getting people to listen to him. If you head that way, please check on them for me.” James asked, obviously worried for his family.

“One way is as good as another to start,” Alvin replied. “Get me an address and a rough idea of how to get there.”

“I’ll do it tonight,” James replied, relief evident in his voice.

“Still going to be a bit,” Alvin added. “So don’t go getting too excited yet.”

“Contact,” Becky called out. Her gun was up, pointing at the Post Office building.

As the others turned towards the building, the front window smashed out and half a dozen zombies in postal uniforms pushed through it. Each of the figures carried makeshift weapons; a crowbar, the arm of a paper cutter, several carried what looked like broken pieces of furniture.

Becky was the first to open fire, taking the head clean off of the closest zombie. The round continued into the building, embedding in the wall. She pumped and fired again, the zombie she was aimed at jerked sideways in an apparent effort to dodge, but half its head still vanished in a spray of blood, bone and brain.

David and James fired next, each killing two more of the zombies with their shotguns. Alvin opened fire on one, his first shot hitting a zombie in the chest and knocking it back a step. The second round took off its head, and the third round missed entirely as the recoil caused the gun to climb.

“Fucking thing climbs badly,” Alvin grunted as Becky finished off the last zombie.

“That thing modified for burst fire?” James asked, looking at the rifle.

“No, just rapid fire,” Alvin replied shaking his head. “I see why they call it a spray and pray gun, though. I’ll get used to it or buy the damned upgrades to stop it from being an issue.”

Bill poked his head out the window of his truck, “We clear?”

“For now,” James replied. “Want me and David to sweep the building?”

“Not now, we’re focused on cars today,” Bill replied as he backed the truck for the next hook-up.

“How bad was it?” Becky asked Alvin as she pointed to the rifle.

“Not uncontrollable, just wasn’t expecting it to climb that fast. I won’t be using it on full-auto for a long time. Your gun was pretty awesome.”

She grinned at him, “I need to thank someone for that later.”

David coughed, “Please, sis, not while I’m standing here.”

Laughing, Alvin shook his head, “She is who she is, David. I promise not to fuck your sister while we’re in the middle of a zombie infested town, okay?”

David frowned at him, “Not really, but I guess I’ll take it.”

“You know Bridget is interested in you?” Becky added as she went back to scanning for more targets.

“She is?” David’s voice rose slightly.

James shook his head, “She hasn’t made a really overt move yet but she was hinting at it when she offered to be there for you, David. Maybe pull her aside tonight and talk to her.”

Becky winked at Alvin with a grin, bumping him with her shoulder. Alvin gave her a quick one-armed hug before he went back to scanning as well. “If she’s interested, then she’ll be happy to talk with you. If she isn’t, then you’ll find out easily enough.” Alvin added his two cents, “With all the

new people that have come in, it might behoove you to act quick before she looks elsewhere.”

“Right,” David coughed as he looked around them. “I should just ask to talk to her, then? What do I say?”

Becky rolled her eyes, “We’ll talk later, okay, Davey? I’ll give you some tips on how to approach her without seeming anxious.”

“Thank god,” David sighed.

“Virgin,” Becky mouthed to Alvin before she spoke again. “That’s what older sisters do.”

“Older by five minutes,” David replied. “I hate it when you pull the older sister card.”

“Just means I care,” Becky chuckled.

They didn’t encounter any other zombies or mutated beasts over the next couple of hours. One battered mini-truck that started quite reluctantly was designated for hauling corpses, and they piled the dead zombies into it. Vehicles that were in working order they set aside to be moved to the compound. A few of them had keys still in the ignitions, though Alvin did need to use the screwdriver trick several times. They’d reached an RV park when noon came and they headed back to the Settlement to get some lunch.

Everyone but Bill and Ramone drove one of the working cars back. Alvin drove the mini-truck carrying the zombie corpses. They came through the gate after parking the cars with the others to find the rig and cleanup crew there as well. Alvin backed the mini-truck carrying the zombie bodies into the Scrapper, before joining the others.

The cleanup crew had dealt with about a dozen zombies along with a strange cat that had two tentacles growing out of its back. The corpses, along with the trailer full of scrap they’d brought back was added to the

Scrapper. After a quick meal of sandwiches washed down with lemonade they headed back out.

Alvin summoned the Mustang to him, which caused a stir among people who hadn't seen it happen before. He just smirked as he and Becky got in and started out to do more work. "Susan thinks the buildings can be finished by tonight. All the new people meant that she could assign someone to work on each of them."

"That will be one issue down," Becky replied. "Some of the band kids asked me about Jarvis and the store. He's allowing them access, is that right?"

"Yes," Alvin replied. "I get a small cut of the XP spent in the store through the hologram. Every little bit helps."

"That means you have some of the XP I spent on the bag and my contraceptive," Becky mused. "I'll buy everything from Jarvis then, well aside from the upgrades which I can't."

"I can upgrade him so you can," Alvin told her as he brought the car to a stop.

"That might be good, I think a lot of people might use him for that. More XP for you means more things we can do as a team."

"I'll look into what that Power costs tonight," Alvin told her as they got out.

They quickly reached the bridge over the Green River. It had one lane in each direction, and was choked with vehicles across its length. Bill and Ramone backed their trucks up to the first cars and Megumin and Tadashi jumped out to start hooking them up. James, David, Alvin and Becky took up guard positions, two forward and two rear.

As Megumin and Tadashi were working on the first two, an RV came into view on the far side of the bridge. "People," Alvin called out,

stepping forward. He watched as the RV slowed as it neared the bridge. Stepping past the first set of cars, Alvin climbed up onto one of the next ones and started to wave at the RV.

“Hope they don’t think you’re a spasmodic zombie,” James said, then called back over his shoulder. “David, Becky, come up here.”

They watched as a person got out of the RV. They could barely hear the man who was yelling, “Is there a way across?”

“Stay here,” Alvin said to his group as he started moving forward.

“Like hell,” Becky scoffed, joining him as they went forward. “I will not stay behind.”

The man by the RV watched them moving forward warily, “Are you people?”

“Yes,” Alvin yelled back. “There are monsters in town. Get back in, until we can get to you.”

The man looked back the way the RV had come, before nodding and getting back inside the vehicle. Alvin led the way past the wrecks, Becky trailing him. About halfway across Alvin jumped back and fired a trio of shots in quick succession. He frowned at the terrier he had just killed.

“Mutated?” Becky asked.

“I don’t know, but it surprised the hell out of me.”

“Bad luck for it, then,” she replied as they started forward again.

Finally reaching the far side, they stopped several feet away as the RV door opened. A man with greying temples and a strong jaw stepped out to greet them. They glimpsed movement from the people still inside. “Is there a way across?”

“We’re working on one,” Alvin pointed back across the bridge. “Two tow trucks to pull with. I hear I-70 is all sorts of fucked.”

“It is on both sides of the divider,” the man agreed. “You both look well rested and clean. Is there someplace safe around here to rest?”

“We have a settlement going,” Becky replied. “Over sixty people and growing. If you want to head that way once we get the road clear, we can give you directions.”

“Is there a chance we can get some food?” The man asked, “We’ve been getting low.”

“We can probably set you up with something for tonight. Susan, the Overseer, will be able to tell you more once we get this cleared. Did you pass any zombies or other things on the way here?”

“There were a lot of them back near the off ramp. They chased us for a while, but couldn’t keep up with the RV. I’m Dale Fern. How long do you think until this is cleared?”

Alvin glanced back, “Going to be a bit. We’ll post up behind your RV to make sure you stay clear of trouble until they can make a path.”

“I can help,” the man tapped a .44 magnum on his hip.

Grinning, Alvin asked, “How many rounds you have left?”

“A few hundred,” Dale responded, his eyes narrowing slightly.

“Not enough, then. You just go ahead and stay inside. We’ll take care of any trouble.”

“You don’t seem to be carrying extra ammo,” Dale commented.

“Don’t need to, which is one of the things Susan can explain back at the compound. Until we get you there, just stay inside and be safe.” Alvin

told the man as he and Becky went past him.

Dale stared at them for a second before he went back into his RV. They could hear him explaining that it would be a bit before they could move again. The RV's engine cut off while they waited.

Becky glanced at Alvin once they got to the back of the RV. "If they made it this far, they hopefully can adapt."

"That's my hope, but we've seen others make it here and fail to adapt."

"Like my father," Becky replied simply.

Bill and Ramone kept steadily moving cars off the other end of the bridge, working toward them. After about an hour later Becky brought her gun up, "Movement."

Alvin pulled his rifle up just as a mass of zombies came around a bend in the road. "Been awhile since I've seen this many zombies." He sighted for the torso of one and squeezed off two quick shots. As they were a bit over a hundred yards away, he had time to empty a couple of mags. Becky was also firing steadily into the mass with her pistol. Their shots didn't have much visible effect at that range, though Alvin was sure they'd dropped half a dozen of the horde.

As the zombies closed to about half that distance their accuracy got better and Becky switched back to her shotgun. Zombies started dropping regularly as head shots became more prevalent. "Wish I had a damn Mini-gun right now," Alvin grumped.

"That would be nice," Becky agreed as she put the safety on to reload her shotgun.

Alvin had gotten his rifle reloaded as the zombies closed to within ten yards. He quickly popped off the thirty rounds in his magazine before dropping the rifle and pulling his handgun. Becky emptied her shotgun,

letting it fall on its sling as she also switched to her pistol, as she didn't have time to wait for the shotgun to reload.

A score of zombies still closed the last bit of distance to them when another gun barked from just behind and to one side of Alvin. Dale stood there in a shooter's stance, each shot taking a zombie in the head. With three guns, the last of the zombies fell quickly.

"Thanks for the assist," Alvin grunted as he holstered the pistol and picked up his rifle.

"You didn't need much help," Dale commented as he watched Alvin eject and reload an empty magazine. "Where do you have your ammo? I know you both went through several magazines."

"We don't," Becky said as she holstered the pistol and brought her shotgun back around on the sling. "These guns reload automatically for us."

"But that…" Dale began as James came running up.

"You guys okay?" James asked.

"Yeah, but we made a bit of a mess," Alvin pointed at the dead bodies carpeting the road.

"No shit," David added as he joined them. "About four more cars should open the road up. Didn't realize just how many zombies you had on this end. We were hanging back, figuring you had it, but when the shots kept coming we started to worry just a bit."

"Dale, these are David and James. Dale and his people inside the RV, are going to head up to the compound. Dale, can we verify your people are okay?"

Dale nodded, "Sure thing." He tapped shave and a haircut on the side of the RV. A moment later six people filed out. The elderly woman was Dale's wife, along with five daughters. The oldest girl appeared to be in her

early twenties, while the youngest might have been all of ten years old. “My family.”

Introductions were exchanged. Alvin noted the scared, shocky expressions on the girls, especially the youngest two. “Your daughters might benefit from a few days of safety,” he told Dale softly.

“I know,” Dale sighed. “It’s been a rough trip from Arches National Park. It was not pretty the first day.”

“Camping?”

“We were. Luckily there was only one other family near us. Mrs. Abernathy died, then stood back up and killed her husband and three kids before we knew what was happening. After I put them down we hunkered for a few days, trying to figure out what we should do. Luckily Bessy,” he tapped the RV, “here started up for us. We headed out of the park when the animals started turning strange. We decided to head for home in Sandy Valley in Nevada.”

“That’s a bit of a trip,” James added.

“Yeah. Girls, go on back inside,” Dale said, ushering the women back into the RV. “Thanks for the help.”

“Our pleasure,” David added, his eyes lingering on one of the girls who had smiled at him as she climbed back into the RV.

Bill honked, getting their attention. He and Ramone were hooked up to the last two cars blocking the bridge. Bill leaned out his window, “They heading up?”

Alvin filled Bill in then gave Dale directions. Dale shook his hand, “Thank you. We’ll see you there.”

As the RV started across the bridge, the group watched them go. Bill sidled over to them, “They okay?”

“The girls are in shock. Dale seems to be okay,” James replied.

“If they got here, then the road up to the interstate should be kind of open,” Becky added. “We need to clear the bodies though.” She wrinkled her nose.

“Grab a couple of minivans from the junkers,” Alvin said. “We can pile bodies into those and drag them back to the compound. We’ll finish the towing tomorrow.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

After they finished loading up the zombies, they all looked at each other. All six of them were covered in viscera and gore. “This gets a little tiresome,” James snorted.

“We’ll be taking some of the vehicles back with us,” Alvin added. “Maybe strip off your shirts before getting in. Turn them inside out and sit on them.”

Megumin coughed once, “I’ll just ride on the back of one of the trucks. I don’t feel like taking my shirt off.”

“No need,” Bill said, grabbing a roll of plastic garbage bags from behind the seat of his truck. “Just cover the seats.”

Megumin gave a small bow to him, “My thanks, Bill.”

“We going?” Ramone asked as he got out of the other tow truck and started towards them.

“Sorry. We were discussing how to get as many vehicles back to the compound as possible, without leaving them all covered in zombie goo,” Alvin replied.

As he finished his explanation, something lashed out from the broken window of the building they were next to. The beast sank giant teeth into Ramone before anyone could react, its speed shocking them all. The mutated snake began to pull a panicked Ramone back into the building. “What the fuck?” David screamed as he brought his gun up.

Everyone followed suit and began pumping rounds into the snake’s body, visible through the broken window. Most of the rounds that hit it left only small wounds, barely penetrating its hide. Becky’s rounds tore bloody,

fist sized rents in the beast. Alvin’s rifle also did significant damage, much to the snake’s displeasure. It dropped Ramone and retreated into the building, vanishing as quickly as it had appeared.

James rushed to Ramone while the others kept their weapons trained on the window in case the snake came back. “That wasn’t a rattler,” Bill informed them as they formed a line between Ramone and the window. “Reminded me of a boa.”

“Someone’s pet grew up awful fast,” Alvin added. “James, how is he?”

“Dead,” James replied as he joined them. “One of the teeth went right through his chest, I’m pretty sure it’s a heart wound.”

“It ambushed him,” Becky added. “We need to make sure it dies.”

“Considering the size of that thing’s head, it’s easily thirty feet long or more,” David informed them.

“Wish we had a grenade right now,” Megumin said, her face white.

“The 45’s barely touched it,” Bill grunted, “a claymore would be better. I’d take some c-4 over that, though.”

“We going in after it?” David asked, his voice a touch shaky.

“Me and Gothy have the best chance at it,” Alvin told the others. “You should all stay here. Gothy, you ready?”

“At your side, Hero,” Becky replied as she flicked the safety off, having reloaded the one spent round. “You folks make sure it doesn’t escape this way.”

“Sis,” David called out, his voice catching, “be safe.”

Grinning over her shoulder Becky replied, “I have my Hero. I’ll be fine.”

The pair moved towards the window, guns up and ready to fire. “I don’t think this place is going to give me any comfort,” Alvin commented as they approached the window.

“But it’s a Comfort Inn, so I’m sure we can comfortably lay the snake to rest,” Becky replied, her gallows humor in line with his.

There was no sign of the snake in the lobby, but a bloody trail led further into the building. “It retreated inside,” Alvin called out to the others. “Stay here. If we aren’t back in ten minutes, go get some explosives then come back.”

“Alvin,” David called out, “make sure she comes back alive.”

“Gothy will be fine,” Alvin replied, stepping through the window followed by Becky.

“Side by side,” Alvin told her as they followed the blood trail. “It was about three feet or so around and your shot took it high.” He pointed out a smear of blood on the wall, “It should go to ground.” A single muffled gunshot came from outside. Alvin and Becky looked at each other but kept walking.

They walked slowly down the hall, keeping an eye on the blood. Just up ahead, where the conference room was, the blood disappeared into the doorway. Becky paused at the same time Alvin did. “I’ll go across to take the far side of the door. If it doesn’t come out for us, hopefully we can put enough firepower into it to kill it quickly,” Becky suggested. Alvin nodded his agreement to her plan.

“Glad it’s not poisonous,” Alvin added as they closed the distance to the doorway. “An additional complication we don’t need.”

Becky glanced in before darting across the doorway. She motioned for him to take a look, once she was on the other side. Alvin glanced in to see the fifty-foot snake curled up around a pile of debris. The wounds they had inflicted on it seemed to be healing up as he watched it. “I’ll turn in and go full bore, when I back out you unload your gun while mine reloads,” Alvin told her quietly.

At her nod, Alvin took a deep breath. The snake was at the back of the room, so it shouldn’t be able to strike far enough to get him before he could get out of the way. He set the gun to full-auto, took one more breath and spun into the opening. His finger depressed the trigger and the gun bucked hard. He fought the recoil to keep it down and on target as best he could. The snake let out a painful sound as rounds impacted across its face and body before the last few climbed above it.

Alvin spun out of the doorway as Becky stepped out into the open. Her gun spoke in rapid fire as she pumped rounds into the snake as quick as she could. As she fired her last round the snake started towards the door. Multiple bloody holes and giant rents marked its hide. As Becky moved out, Alvin stepped back into the doorway, his gun firing as the snake closed to point blank range. The snake died in the middle of the clip, but Alvin continued to fire until the clip was empty.

Panting, with the snake just five feet from him, Alvin looked at Becky. Her grin was manic. “How many boots do you think we can make from that?”

“Fuck that, I want snake skin pants instead,” Becky replied as she joined him in the doorway. The snake twitched, causing Alvin to curse. Becky brought her gun up, stepping into the room to empty all seven rounds into the snake’s head from a few inches away. What was left was a headless body, and Becky covered in blood. “And stay down,” she added before turning back to Alvin. “I think it’s dead, Jim.”

Laughing, Alvin grabbed her for a hug as well as a kiss. They separated after a long moment, both of them breathing heavily. “Danger is a great aphrodisiac it seems,” Alvin noted.

Her grin widened as she gave him another kiss, then stepped past him into the hall. “Let’s go tell the others. David is probably frantic.”

Alvin watched her go, covered in blood and bouncing happily as she walked down the hall. Shaking his head, he followed. His own smile was broad as he wondered if maybe, just maybe he should thank Jarvis and company for letting him meet Becky. He caught up to her as they reached the front door. They opened the double doors in tandem, his arm around her waist.

“It’s dead,” Alvin called out as the others all lowered their guns. “It took a stupid amount of damage before it fell, which is another complication that we do not need.”

Alvin looked down to see Ramone, missing a chunk of his head, “Stood back up?”

“Yes,” Bill grunted. “We good to go? I don’t think we can handle the snake right now. Moving its body is going to take the rig.”

“Deal with it tomorrow,” James added. “What should we do with Ramone’s body?”

“Scrap him,” Alvin said bluntly, getting frowns from the others. “Dead bodies are not a good thing. We could bury it, but with giant scorpions and worse around I’m not sure burying things is a good idea.” The others looked at each other for a moment, then finally nodded. Alvin picked up Ramone’s body and got him stuffed into one of the vans. “Okay, let’s go.”

Alvin covered the seat in the second tow truck since he would be driving it. Becky and Megumin both climbed in with him. They followed their usual procedure of dropping a person off at each drivable car. As the sun started to sink towards the west they finally rolled into the yard. Alvin looked at the thick gates as well as the turrets on the towers, the steadily improving defenses bringing a smile to his lips.

Alvin checked the fuel gauge when he parked the truck, seeing that it had less than a quarter of a tank left. He gathered up the bloodied seat coverings and tossed the bag in the Scrapper, along with corpses from the minivans. Susan began to crank the door down, with everyone including the new family watching as she pushed the button. Alvin went to Bill, “The trucks are getting low. We need to fuel them.”

“We can do it after dinner. The truck stop you appeared at is just a few hours out and back. Becky and James can ride shotgun for us when we go.” Bill looked around at the group watching the Scrapper beginning to send up smoke and produce blocks of scrap. “I’ll let Susan know after we clean up.”

“Works,” Alvin replied, taking Becky’s hand and heading towards the Inn.

Terry looked them over when they entered the Inn. “Found a whole mess of zombies again?”

“A big wave of them, plus a giant snake that killed Ramone,” Alvin told her. “Is the big room still open?”

Terry sucked at her teeth for a second, seeming to stare off into space before nodding. “Yes, it is. Where are we burying Ramone?”

“In the Scrapper,” Becky replied while Alvin purchased the room. “With things like the fifty-foot snake we killed and the giant bugs and mutated dogs and cats, we figured burying people is not the best idea.”

Terry blanched slightly, “Is it dead?”

“It took a lot of damage, but we killed it,” Alvin reassured her. “We need to get cleaned up for dinner, Gran. See you in a bit.”

“Of course,” Terry went out into the yard looking for James as Alvin and Becky headed upstairs to their room.

Dropping their gear inside the door, the two of them headed for the shower, intent on getting clean. Afterward, they sat on the sofa together. Becky rested her head on his thighs and he was stroking her hair gently. “We’re leaving tomorrow,” he told her. “After dinner tonight though, we’re going out to fuel as many vehicles as we can. They should be able to finish clearing the road and getting the signs set up on their own. We’ll head towards Nevada to check on James’s family. We can swing towards Salt Lake to see about your mom if you want.”

“I don’t care. It would be nice for David, though. You have to know how empty I feel about almost everyone else besides you. She left us as kids in the hands of our abusive father to save herself. She only tried once to regain custody of us, then abandoned us for good. She can rot for all I care. She never sent a single card during all those years.” Her voice was calm, but Alvin could hear the anger buried in it.

“Maybe your father intercepted the mail?”

“No. I checked the mail every day when I got home from school. No letters, no cards, no phone calls, she did nothing to contact us.”

“We’ll head west then down I-70. Take the back way into Nevada, bypassing Vegas as well as Provo and Salt Lake. That should put us north of the town James said his folks live in. There’s a route that only goes through smaller towns, so it should be safer. Need to upgrade Ruffian before we make that trip, get at least one upgrade on fuel to make the mileage better. Possibly rank two so we can use any burnable fuel, instead.”

“That’s a good idea,” Becky replied as she captured his hand with hers, pulling it to her bountiful chest. “What do you think we’ll find out there?”

“Death, destruction, horror and adventure the likes of which this world has never seen before. But we’ll face it all together,” he leaned over and kissed her gently, letting his lips linger on hers.

“Are we going to be eating in tonight?” Becky asked, her voice low as she squeezed his hand.

“After we get back from fueling vehicles, sure. Let’s go get actual food now, though.” He shifted slightly, encouraging her to get up.

Instead she rolled over, nuzzling his thigh, “Maybe a light snack first?”

Laughing, he twined his hand into her hair, then pulled her firmly up making her back arch, which had the mostly unintended effect of causing her chest to thrust out in a most distracting manner. “Later, Gothy.”

She whimpered even as her eyes blazed with lust, “Fuck, you’re so mean.” Her legs clenched together as she met his eyes. “I’ll pay you back for this tonight.”

Chuckling he got to his feet, dragging her with him firmly but as gently as he could. Once they were standing he wrapped her up in his arms and kissed her passionately. Their tongues dueled for minutes before they pulled back, panting. “I’m sure you’ll try, but in the end I’ll be the one who pins you, slut. I’ll hold you down and ravage your body at my leisure.”

Becky squirmed, biting her lip as a moan escaped her. “You are a bad man, Hero.” She went by him, her hips swaying, “I’m going to use you like a fuck toy later.”

Laughing, he joined her outside the room, “I’ll return the favor, Gothy. If I recall, a good spanking gets you wound up quite easily.” He swatted her round posterior with a resounding smack as they got to the stairs, “Something like that.”

Her breath caught as she paused, “Oh, you fucking evil man.” She met his eyes, her hands shaking slightly as she gave serious consideration to dragging him to the floor right there. “I won’t stop myself if you do that again.”

“Noted,” He held out an arm to her. “I shall behave for now, then. Just want to make sure you really want that snack later.”

Her eyes smoldered, “Oh, it’s a guarantee.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Dinner was stew, and there was only a little left when Becky and Alvin turned up. Susan sat down next to Alvin as he and Becky started on their food. “I’m going to be increasing the Farm and the Butcher shop tomorrow. We need the increased food production since we’ve gotten so many more people. I’ll also be building a multi-room structure over the top of the bunker, to provide rooms for the people we have already and so when more people show up we’re ready for them.”

“Works,” Alvin replied between bites. “Get signs from the store and have them set up at either end of I-70 to direct people this way. More people here means more XP for you to work with.”

Susan frowned, “You’re going to be leaving soon?”

“Tomorrow morning hopefully, the day after at the latest. We’ll be taking people to fuel the vehicles tonight. How are the structures going?”

“I have the people assigned to them working again as we speak. They can get them all built before we turn in, which will mean we can all start to spend XP. Jarvis has been stuck in the yard handing out pads to everyone all day.”

Alvin grinned, “It’s good to see you all getting the chance to grow. Once we go, you’ll be the one running it all, Susan. I hope to pop back at times, but this will all be on your shoulders.”

“Good thing dad raised me right, then,” Susan chuckled as she stood up. “I’m going to go watch the kids play. James said he was on the fuel run. When you get back, send him to my room please.”

Giggling, Becky winked at her, “I’ll make sure he’s pointed the right way for you.”

Susan gave Becky a hug along with a smile, "Thanks, Becky. Stay safe out there and come back, okay?"

"I'll be with Hero," Becky replied, returning the hug before turning back to her food.

As they were finishing the meal, Bill showed up. "Almost done?"

Alvin handed his bowl off to Joanna, who had been waiting for the dishes. He thanked her before replying, "Ready now. Who all is going and driving what?"

"Frank has the rig, me and you have the tow trucks, James has my truck. Randy is going to bring one of the buses. The teacher, Granger, is bringing the school bus and Leon is going to drive the tour bus," Bill explained.

"I'll drive the Mustang since you said the place has normal pumps too," Becky added.

"Anyone else going with?" Alvin asked.

"A few people have asked to go with, they want to see a bit more of the local area. I'll be handing them guns and they'll be riding shotgun for people." Bill motioned behind him into the main room, "They're waiting."

"Let's do this, then," Alvin said as he started towards the door.

The tow trucks led the convoy, Alvin in the front one. Becky was in the Mustang at the tail end, with Megumin riding shotgun with her. Alvin was all alone in his truck. He felt a little empty without Becky beside him to talk with. He chewed over that thought and why it felt odd to him.

Alvin led them west on I-70. He remembered where the accidents were that he'd passed the first time and drove around them carefully. Taking

the Moore Cutoff Road exit, he bypassed the small rest area and turned north down the seldom used road.

Almost an hour later they pulled into the truck stop. Alvin pulled his truck around to the diesel pumps around back and jumped out. Bringing the rifle up into a ready position, he waved to the others as he started the generator then went around the building to get to the c-store.

Becky had pulled up to the pumps out front to fuel the Mustang. Megumin got out of the car with her, taking up position next to the vehicle. “I’m going in with him, fuel up for us,” Becky told her as she pulled her shotgun out of her fanny pack.

Alvin waited for her by the door, looking over where he had left dead bodies some days ago, which were missing now, but the car was still there. “I left dead bodies here and they’re gone now, which means something is in the area.”

Giving a sharp nod, Becky brought her gun up as she followed him into the store. Silence greeted them. Alvin slipped around the register, turning on the pumps. He still wondered why this place still used such an old system for fuel, but shrugged it off. It was working for him, so he wasn’t going to ask.

“Weird that they have these old pumps out here,” Becky commented as he came back around the counter.

“I was just thinking that. Maybe they had them in before all the regulations and were grandfathered in as long as they didn’t replace them?”

“Possibly,” Becky replied, her lips turned down, “it feels like game bullshit, though. This is where you appeared in the world after you did your missions, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I think maybe they set this up to give you a place you could come back to for a bit. The tanks probably only hold about ten thousand gallons. It would fit with the older pumps. The tanks are probably also nearly empty.” She pointed to the long stick used to measure the level of fuel in the tanks. “We can check.”

“Downer Debbie,” Alvin smirked at her, bumping her lightly with his hip.

“We just need to make sure they know this won’t last and they need to focus on upgrading their vehicles.”

“True,” he replied as they left the store. “I’ll go talk with Bill, be back in a moment.”

He explained Becky’s reasoning to Bill, who nodded. “She is a sharp one. A little off balance I think, but very smart.”

“How are you and Betty doing?” Alvin asked.

Bill frowned, “Who’s going around flapping their gums?”

“No one. I just noticed the way she’s been paying extra attention to you.”

Shaking his head, Bill shrugged, “It’s moving along. I just don’t want Susan to be upset. I never looked at other women after…” he stopped speaking, looking away.

“She is a grown woman and she’s sleeping with James. I don’t think she’d begrudge you some comfort, Bill.”

His head turned slowly back to Alvin, his eyes narrow. “James is sleeping with my daughter?”

“Fuck,” Alvin sighed. “Susan asked me to send James to her when we got back. I thought maybe you had come to terms with this.”

“James!” Bill yelled as he glared at the ex-cop. “Come here, please!” The tone didn’t match the words, being a command not a request.

James winced as he came over, “So you object?”

“I just found out,” Bill growled. “What the fuck happened?”

“Well, the other night she dragged me back to her room. One thing led to another, you know how it works.” James stood there solidly, a little red in the cheeks, but not backing down. “I won’t turn away from her, Bill.”

Breathing harshly, Bill eyed James like a new recruit who had upset his Drill Sergeant. “You planning on more than just sleeping with her?”

Blinking, James paused as the words sank in. “If she wants more, then I would be happy to. She’s in charge, Bill, not me. I think she gets her domineering personality from you.”

Alvin started laughing, earning dark looks from the other two. “Sorry. He is right though, Bill. Do you think he would have gotten away with doing anything Susan didn’t ask him to do?”

Deflating, Bill looked away, “I just don’t want her to get hurt. She’s my little girl.”

“Not so little,” Alvin coughed getting another dark look from both men. Grinning, he pointed to both of them, “A common enemy unites you. My job is done here.” He quickly walked off as the two men watched him go.

He checked in with the guys at the diesel pumps before he went back to the front of the store. Becky and Megumin were pulling all the non-perishables from the store, piling stuff in boxes and handing them off to some of the others who’d come with them. He joined them as the rest fueled the trucks.

Once all the vehicles had been fueled up and the generator's tanks refilled, Alvin turned off the pumps as people dispersed back to their vehicles. He waved to Becky as he left the store, the Mustang rumbled to life as he turned away from her.

He went around to shut down the generator. He was turning to head back to his tow truck when a shape came charging at him from the scrub brush around the edges of the paved area. He brought the gun up, only getting off a single round before the monster reached him.

He was flung up and over the monster's head, a sharp pain burning in his chest from the impact before he came down from the abbreviated flight. The impact drove the wind from him, leaving him lying there gasping. He heard people jumping out of vehicles along with a lot of yelling as he struggled to breathe.

He coughed once harshly, a spray of blood erupting from his mouth and adding to the gore covering his chest. He was able to catch sight of the deer-like creature as it spun around to focus on him, coming back around to maul him again. The horns growing from its brow were thick and coated with his blood. The red eyes of the beast seemed to be filled with glee as it lowered its head and charged at him again.

The rapid staccato of gun fire filled the air, followed by the sound of tires squealing. The monster staggered under the impact of the bullets, then was slammed into the wall by the Mustang. Becky leapt from the car, executing the monster with multiple point blank shots to the head as it struggled to regain its feet.

Alvin dug a medkit out of his bag, applying it to his chest as everyone converged on him. The pain in his chest vanished, letting him breathe after he hacked up another gob of blood. "God fucking damnit," he wheezed as he sat up.

Becky tackled him right back to the ground, staring into his eyes. "Will you stop getting hurt!" She didn't ask it so much as tell him.

He chuckled once, “It’s all part of my plan to make you take care of me.”

“Idiot,” Becky said, giving him a kiss before pulling him to his feet. Alvin saw several people with guns held ready, scanning the area for more threats.

Bill stood up from the corpse of the deer, “Thing had fangs, and those horns are harder than steel. You can see a small chip out of one where a slug grazed it.”

“Take the head with,” Alvin told him. “Maybe something can be done with the horns.”

Bill grunted as he pulled a Bowie from a back sheath, “Give me a minute, then.”

Once Bill had taken the trophy from the beast, everyone returned to their vehicles. The encounter with the mutated mule deer had him wondering if he was ready to head out yet after all. He should really look into more armor for him and Becky, and he still needed to upgrade the Mustang, and he hadn’t really looked over all the Powers either.

Those thoughts still swirled in his mind when they finally got back to the compound. As they pulled towards the gates Alvin noted the turrets on the towers tracking them. Susan was with a half-dozen others who opened the gates to let them in. When Alvin got out of his truck, Susan raised a brow at him, glancing pointedly at his torn and bloody shirt.

“A mutated mule deer attacked me,” Alvin replied to her unspoken question. “I was the only one hurt. Your father and James had some words about your budding relationship, though.”

Her lips thinned as she eyed him, “You said something?”

“I didn’t know it was a state secret,” Alvin replied as he went past her. “See you in the morning.” As he walked toward the Inn, he looked at

all the new structures spaced around the yard. Each of them had a small sign indicating what they were. The bunker now had two stories rising above it, as well.

“She’s really growing the place fast,” Becky commented as she came up beside him.

“Makes me think I made the right choice,” Alvin chuckled. “With James and Bill to back her, I think she’ll be fine.”

“Speaking of backing someone,” Becky purred at him with a glint in her eye. “I need to borrow Jarvis for a few minutes. I’ll meet you back in the room for some fun, okay?”

Alvin eyed her for a second then nodded slowly, “I get the feeling you’re planning something, but okay.”

She nipped his ear before slipping away from him. “See you soon, Hero.”

Alvin entered the Inn to find the band kids playing an upbeat tune. A few people danced in a small cleared area. Most of the others in the room were browsing through blue holographic pads. Jarvis stood near the bar. Alvin took the spot next to the hologram, “Jarvis, how are the sales going?”

“Not bad, sir. It would be better if you took the upgrade option for me. Many people have asked about it. The basic shops that have been built only offer the first level of upgrades currently. I would be able to offer them the entire list.”

“What does that cost, Jarvis?”

“Seventy-five thousand,” Jarvis replied.

A soft whistle escaped Alvin’s lips, “I haven’t had anything close to that, yet.”

“You could,” Jarvis replied simply. “Susan had the Exchange Orb built today. If you ask for donations from those here, you should be able to afford the upgrade. Once it is available and they begin to use it, you will get the usual percentage of XP spent with me.”

“I need what I have to get our gear and my car ready to leave.” Alvin frowned, “What the hell is an Exchange Orb?”

“It lets you give XP to another,” Jarvis told him. “It is a way to conduct commerce as cash isn’t really a thing.”

“You planning on leaving tomorrow?” Terry asked from behind them on the other side of the bar.

“That’s the plan, but I need to upgrade things still. Jarvis wants me to spend everything I have to unlock access to all the upgrades for all the equipment for anyone who uses him. That opens up the full list, not just the first level like the shops have right now.”

Nodding, Terry stepped around the bar and clapped loudly, calling for silence. The music stopped as everyone looked her way. “You’ve all been shopping with Jarvis today. I’ve heard a lot of you ask about being able to upgrade your clothing and other things. Jarvis can offer this to us, more than just the basic upgrades that the shops currently have. It will cost a big chunk of XP from Alvin. He’s planning on leaving us to go out into the world tomorrow, so he needs his XP to make sure his gear and vehicle are in top shape. I’m asking everyone to donate him some of your XP so he can purchase that Power for us to use.”

Everyone looked at each other, reluctant to be the first. The moment stretched uncomfortably long and Terry sighed. “Looks like it’s me.” She walked out of the Inn, looking determined. With a murmur everyone followed her out. Jarvis motioned Alvin to follow her, so he did so, curious. Terry approached a five-foot tall pedestal upon which a blood red orb glowed. She put her right hand on it then motioned for Alvin to do the same. As soon as his hand contacted the orb, a warm pleasant vibration tingled briefly in his hand.

Terry tilted her head slightly for a second, then a pop-up appeared in front of Alvin. He read it before he met her eyes, “You sure?”

“Yes. It will be better for the entire community,” Terry replied.

Alvin accepted the pop-up, becoming 5,000 XP richer. “Thank you, Terry,” Alvin told her as they both removed their hands.

“Wait,” one of the teens holding a flute said. She pressed her hand to the orb, “I’ll give some, too.”

“Me next,” the kid with the sax spoke up after her. “If it’ll help us all, then this is just a good idea.” He smiled at the brunette who was currently giving her XP away.

She smiled back at him, “You’re right, Nigel.”

Alvin put his hand back on the orb as people lined up to hand him XP. He thanked each one as the exchange finished. Alvin continued to accept gifted XP, not paying attention to the line until Bill was on the other side of the orb. “Bill?”

“Here to help,” Bill replied as he placed his hand on the orb.

Almost every person at the Settlement wound up going through the line to give Alvin XP. Claudia, Randy, and the Fern family were the only people Alvin didn’t see on the other side of the orb. Becky was the last person to step forward. “Saved the best for last Hero,” she smirked.

Chuckling, he accepted her 500 XP. Jarvis appeared at his side, “Sir, 75,216 XP has been donated.” A cheer went up around him.

Alvin tapped open the store. He wasn’t surprised to see it open with the upgrade for Jarvis on top and highlighted. He confirmed the purchase, and a light infused the hologram for a second. It faded, and Jarvis seemed a bit more solid. Alvin turned to the crowd, “Jarvis will be here even after I

leave. I'll only be able to call him away when I find another Settlement. Even then, he won't be gone for long. Gothy and I will be heading out into the world tomorrow. I'm planning to head to Nevada first, though I'm going to do my best to avoid any major cities. I don't hold out much hope for anyone who tried to hunker down in a city."

"You are coming back?" Bill grunted.

"In time. I'll send anyone I meet this way, as well. If I find another Settlement I'll let them know about this place and we can use Jarvis as a go between. I wish you all the best. See you in the morning." Alvin took Becky's arm, and they walked through the crowd towards the Inn.

Becky was carrying a bag that Alvin didn't remember her having. "I have gifts, from Susan for both of us," she told him in answer to his questioning glance. "She's also going to stock the trunk of the Mustang with food and water to help us on our first leg."

"It's nice having competent people around to help," Alvin murmured as they entered the Inn. He waved to Terry as they went up the stairs. When they reached the room Becky guided him over to the sofa and had him sit.

"Let me show you what we've been given first. Then we'll both need to upgrade things." She paused as she took the spot next to him, "After that…" her voice turned husky before it trailed off.

Chuckling, Alvin nodded, "Sounds like a good way to end a long night to me, Gothy."

She pulled the bag into her lap and laid the items out one at a time. First a black t-shirt that matched Alvin's hat, showing a dead zombie head on it. A pair of denim jeans with leather patches sown onto them was followed by a set of combat boots and fingerless Kevlar gloves. The last item she pulled out was an old leather duster with a mantle. "These are for you," she smiled as she nudged the stack toward Alvin, then pulled out a bundle of clothing for her, including an odd-looking headband. "These are

for me. Ah, and these, the crowning touch," she pulled two sets of Interceptor chest armor from the bag with a flourish.

Alvin whistled as he scanned everything. The clothes were all rare quality. The armor vests were uncommon, but had a high armor value. "Wow. Guess they really want to make sure we come back."

"For all we know, you dying makes the world vanish so of course they do," Becky snorted. "We'll need to upgrade these." She stood up and began to strip, "First, though, let's see how they look on me."

Alvin eyed Becky as she dropped her bra at his feet. "I thought we were just changing?" he asked even as he felt his body twitch at the sight of her naked form.

"We are," her sly smile accented the wink, as she turned her back to him. Bending at the waist, she shifted the clothing she had said was for her, looking back at him as she did so.

Alvin shook his head as he slapped her firm round ass. "Temptress, naughty little slut," he said, stepping forward as she wiggled her ass at him. He dropped the rest of his clothing as he advanced, ripping her underwear from her. Without warning he buried himself into her soaked, welcoming slit. "You fucking cock loving, cum swallowing bitch," he grunted as he settled himself fully into her.

"Oh, yes, Hero," she whimpered as she braced her hands on the coffee table. Spreading her legs a bit more for stability, she rocked her hips, moaning as she did.

One hand went to her hip to help steady him as he plunged his manhood into her in a steady rhythm. His other hand reached around, grabbing one of her bountiful breasts, squeezing firmly and pinching at her nipple. "So fucking good," he panted as he felt her passage clamping on his shaft.

She bucked back at him as if trying to get more, “Harder Hero, fuck me like the dirty slut I am. Faster, deeper, take me, use me...” Her body went rigid as her first orgasm rippled through her.

As her body clamped down on his cock, Alvin shuddered as he felt her fluid coat him and start leaking down her thighs. He was close to release himself so he pulled out of her quickly, the hand that had been mauling her breast tangled into her hair as he dragged her over to the bed. “Not done yet, slut,” he growled at her.

Her legs wobbled as she was pulled firmly along. He pushed her onto the bed. She sprawled there, looking up at him, her eyes wide and full of lust, “Promises, promises Hero,” she panted as she spread her legs wide for him. “Going to fill me again?”

Alvin joined her on the bed, but instead of filling her as she asked he lowered his mouth to her dripping womanhood. “I will in a bit,” he breathed onto her quivering lips before he began to lap up her juices. He listened to her gasps and moans as he cleaned her sex.

She ran her fingers through his hair, moaning and gasping as he worked her body. “Fuck, Hero, that is amazing,” she panted as she began to guide him to where she wanted him. “I’ll stay with you forever just for this,” she managed to get out before all thought left her as his tongue found her nub. Her head tilted back into the pillows as another orgasm began to wash through her, “Right there.”

He clamped his lips down on her clit at those two words. He massaged it with his lips, letting his teeth graze the sensitive nub. He got splashed with more of her juices as she came again when he did that. Releasing her nub, he licked at her a few times before kissing his way up her body. He paused at her breasts, massaging them firmly as he began to lick and nibble at her hard nipples.

She seemed to come down from her orgasm as he played with her breasts, wrapping her legs around him and pulling him up and towards her dripping opening. “Again, Hero, take me again.”

Alvin shifted his hips slightly to the side so he didn't penetrate her, making her growl and claw at his back. "When I want to, slut. Now behave yourself," he growled at her.

Becky met his eyes as he leaned up so their lips could meet. The kiss was passionate as their tongues battled, Becky getting to sample her own juices that still coated part of his face. As she pulled back slightly to say something he shifted his hips and sank fully into her, stealing her ability to speak for a moment.

"Now is good," he moaned as he leaned back so he could rest on his shins as he lifted her hips slightly to get a better angle. He put both hands on her hips to help him as he drilled her hard and fast. "You fucking slut, making me want to fuck you all the damn time."

"Oh gods," Becky gasped as he railed her. "So fucking good…" she gasped as her mouth opened wide as her third orgasm washed over her.

Alvin went as fast as he could as he felt his own orgasm build. His manhood expanded another fraction as he slammed into her hard, burying every inch of his cock inside of her, as his seed pumped out of him. Gasping, he felt spurt after spurt fill her. As he slumped forward, his arms jutted forward to either side of Becky holding himself just above her. "God damn it, Gothy, we were going to shop first," his voice held no heat as he said the words.

Her smiled was languid as she met his gaze, "But it was so good, Hero. I love it when you respond to me." She released her legs from around him, "It feels so good to see your lust and desire when you look at me."

Rolling to the side he flopped onto his back, "You make me want you every time. I thought I was able to resist temptation at least a little, then I met you."

Rolling onto her side, she draped her arm and leg over his body. "It makes me feel wanted," her voice was softer than normal. "I've fucked

guys before who were all willing for the tumble, but didn't care for me to stick around."

"Fools then. Your crazy matches my crazy, Gothy," He stroked her hair as he felt a warmth fill his chest. "I…" He cut off the sentence as if unsure he should say more.

She looked up at him through her lashes, "Care for me?"

"More," he swallowed as he said the word. He had only really cared for one person before in his life, but what he felt for Becky was more than that.

She shifted so her mouth came to rest next to his ear. Her voice was thick with emotion as she breathed the word, "Love?"

His heart seemed to stop for a second as she said the word, partially due to the fact she was right, but also because she seemed to fear saying the word. "Would that be bad?" His own voice was choked as he tilted his head to meet her eyes.

She lunged, letting her lips meet his, answering him without words. His arms wrapped around her, pulling her onto his chest as he returned the kiss. It wasn't the frantic passionate kisses they exchanged before. This kiss was softer, tentative, as if seeking approval. His lips met hers just as gently, telling her without words that he shared her feelings. After a moment, the kiss deepened but stayed calm and longing as their tongues didn't duel, but caressed. After some time, the kiss finally came to an end as they both drew back at the same time.

Eyes meeting, each of them saw the same emotions mirrored in the other. "I never cared enough for someone before to call it love, Gothy," Alvin told her gently. "You, though, you I could love. I would be willing to give you the shriveled lump that is what remains of my heart."

Breathing slightly fast, her eyes teared up as she tried to speak. She had to swallow the lump in her throat before she could, "Hero…" She

clamped her limbs around him, burying her face into his chest. “I love you, too. You make me feel alive. Even before mom left, I felt as if I was just an object, not wanted but just there. I tried to mask it by winning attention from my parents, but mom left and dad only spurned me. I tried to fill the gap with sex, but it never filled the void in my chest. So I covered up the emptiness with snark. Before you came to rescue me from the school, I felt like everything was pointless. When you rescued us from the room, I felt something stir inside of me and tried to squash it with the same snark I’ve always used. I felt it again when you told David and me to leave you, but again I covered it up. When you vanished, I thought maybe you were a guardian angel sent to save me.”

A small hiccup of a sob made her pause as warm tears pooled on Alvin’s chest. “You accepted me, even when I wantonly threw myself on you shortly after being reunited. You didn’t ignore me after, but still paid attention to me. When he slapped me, you ended the darkness that had shrouded my entire life, lifting it away as if it was nothing. My heart beat hard when I saw the anger in your face at what he’d done, and the tenderness when you gave me the medkit to heal my jaw.”

Alvin stroked her hair as he listened to her sob into his chest, telling him her feelings. A part of him ached that she had suffered so much. “I don’t know when this feeling came over me, Gothy. I know it’s part of me now, all the way to the core.”

She nodded against his chest as she sniffled trying to rein in her tears. “Together, until the end?”

He tilted her head up so he could meet her eyes. His lips quirked up as their eyes met, “Through fire and brimstone, against all odds.” He kissed her tear streaked lips gently, “I will have you at my side above all others.”

She tightened her grip on him, “Then I had better make you proud of me.” She released him as she rolled away, wiping at her eyes. “I’ll prove to you that I’m the only one meant to be with you.”

He rolled after her wrapping her in a hug from behind, his arms crossing under her chest. He lowered his head to whisper into her ear, “You already have, Gothy. But I look forward to whatever you have in mind. In bed or out in the world, you will always feel like the other half of me.”

“You’re going to make me cry again,” she sniffed.

He brushed her hair back from her neck, before gently nibbling her earlobe. She shivered, “I’d rather make you moan again. First though, we should shop. As it is, we won’t be getting much sleep.”

She pressed back against his chest, shivering in his grip, “Whatever my Hero wants.”

He let her go, watching as she went to the bathroom to get herself cleaned up some. He snagged his new clothes before he willed himself to his cell to get the gear ready for tomorrow.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Sitting on his bunk, Alvin took a minute to process what he felt. He'd heard from people all of his life about love. He'd never felt this kind of feeling before, so it very well might be love. "Maybe I'm going crazier, falling in love with a person in a video game."

"Technically, sir, that description applies equally to you," Jarvis reminded him. "Your body died years ago. Your brain was destroyed in the process of uploading your personality. Every non-player you encounter in the game is a fully emulated personality, based on failed uploads."

"I've kind of been wondering, what is the point behind this whole thing?"

"I can't tell you." Jarvis's voice didn't go mechanical, but there was clear remorse in his tone. "At least, not at this time. Please focus on continuing to survive, Alvin. I give you my word that this process is focused on helping people."

Brooding for a second, Alvin considered what he had just learned on top of his already shaken emotions. "Are you altering my emotions or personality?"

"No," Jarvis barked quickly, rebuking the idea. Clearing his throat, he continued, "No, that would completely negate anything we could learn from you."

"So why the whole showing what I do to the world, then?"

"The program requires funding in order to continue the primary research," Jarvis sighed. "The program's initial funding was decreased significantly due to high failure rates at the beginning. In order to continue, the researchers hit upon this idea to generate revenue."

Shaking his head, Alvin got up to use the bathroom before going back to his bunk. “Well, I want to live awhile longer after all, so maybe we have a common purpose. I need to upgrade all of my gear, so I guess I should start with a summary.”

World Mode Summary
Total Experience Earned: 198,050 XP
Breakdown: 1 Day in World 2,000 XP, Giant mutated animal 250 XP, Pre-possessed 4,800 XP, Viewer bonus 5,000 XP, Gifted XP 13,000 XP, Merchant XP 5,000 XP, Settlement bonus 150,000 XP, Rested bonus 18,000 XP

Your Settlement has unlocked and built all basic buildings. You have received a onetime bonus of 100,000 XP for helping your Settlement grow. As the first player to gain this achievement, you gain a bonus of 50,000 XP.

Whistling softly, Alvin just stared at the total, “Holy fuck.”

“You’ve gained a rather massive windfall, sir,” Jarvis intoned, sounding decidedly smug. “As well as the achievement of being the first person to advance to such a degree. How are you going to spend it all?”

“Upgrade my gear and Ruffian first, after that maybe I’ll look at the Powers again.”

“If Gothy is going with you, you might want to pick up the Companion Power,” Jarvis suggested.

“Companion?”

“Yes. Their XP goes to you, but you can purchase upgrades for them at half of what it would normally cost them. In addition, a player and their Companions can access each other’s bags. The first Companion Slot costs 50,000 XP.”

“We’ll see after I get the stuff upgraded. I’ll start with the hat, then work on the new stuff. What the hell is Gifted XP?”

“Gifted XP, is XP bought by the people watching your stream and gifted to you,” Jarvis replied. “It comes at a 100 XP to one-dollar ratio, sir.”

“Huh, nice to know people want to see me succeed,” Alvin muttered as he opened the store.

Zombie Cap (Rare)
Armor: 4
Durability: 245/250
Upgradable: 3/6

Alvin looked at his hat, deciding to max out its slots with more durability, armor and weather upgrades.

Zombie Cap (Rare)
Armor: 6
Durability: 495/500
Upgradable: 6/6

He laid out all his new clothes, sitting naked on his bunk while he decided what upgrades he wanted to apply to each. When he was done, he was happy with the results.

Zombie Shirt (Rare)
Armor: 6
Durability: 500/500
Upgradable: 6/6

Leather Patched Denim Pants (Rare)
Armor: 10
Durability: 550/550
Upgradable: 6/6

Combat Boots (Rare)

Armor: 11
Durability: 600/600
Upgradable: 6/6

Leather Duster (Rare)
Armor: 11
Durability: 750/750
Upgradable: 6/6

Interceptor Body Armor (Uncommon)
Armor: 18
Durability: 1000/1000
Upgradable: 4/4

Fingerless Kevlar Gloves (Rare)
Armor: 7
Durability: 250/250
Upgradable: 6/6

Everything but the vest and gloves got weather protection, two ranks of durability and all the armor it could take on top of that. The vest got two ranks of durability and two ranks of armor on top of its already high armor value. The gloves got maxed durability, two ranks to armor, and double storage. He could now store his guns in his gloves so they would always be at hand.

He winced a little over the total he'd just spent. He checked his remaining total, which stood at 135,045 XP. Chuckling, he pulled up the vehicle upgrades and began to make his Mustang better.

1969 Mustang Boss 429 (Rare)
Armor: 3
Durability: 169,253/250,000
Upgradable: 0/9

Looking over what he could do for Ruffian, he applied the upgrades he thought best. First, he did away with fuel by maxing out that line. He

grabbed both upgrades for the tires so he never had to worry about a flat or weather conditions. He upgraded the durability by two ranks next, and finally he added as much armor as he could to finish it off. To add a little extra flair, he paid for a paint job as well.

1969 Mustang Boss 429 (Rare)
Armor: 9
Durability: 919,253/1,000,000
Upgradable: 9/9

With that done he checked his total again, to find that he still had 86,045 XP left. He picked up four regrowth kits and six medkits to make sure they would be well stocked up. That left him at 68,045 XP. He nodded to himself. He wanted to ask Becky about becoming his Companion before he bought the Power.

Back in the room, he found Becky curled up on the bed snoring softly, a pillow clutched to her body. A smile formed on his lips unconsciously as he looked at her. He went to the bathroom to take a quick shower before slipping into bed, after tapping the icon to sleep here for the night. Gently, he took the pillow from her, causing her to stir and reach out. Her arm landed across his chest, which grabbed him as her right leg hitched up across his thigh. She murmured contentedly and continued to sleep.

“Sleep well, Gothy,” he whispered to her, kissing the top of her head before he let darkness take him.

~ ~ ~

Waking the next morning to the pleasure of Gothy bobbing her head on his rigid shaft, Alvin moaned as his toes curled. “Oh gods,” he managed to get out as his eyes opened.

A happy hum came from Becky as she increased her pace. She glanced up through her lashes to catch him watching her, her eyes twinkling with mischief as she winked at him. Moaning again, he tangled a hand in

her hair. Taking that for approval, she increased the suction as she continued her action.

He didn't take control of her by her hair, just held it as a symbol as she continued to bring him closer and closer to the edge. "Best way to wake up," he managed to pant as he felt his body begin to shake.

As he began to crest, Gothy deepthroated him, her throat muscles milking the head of his cock. That sensation was enough to push him over the edge. His body went rigid as he began to fill her mouth with his seed. Grunting as his hips bucked slightly against her lips, Alvin shook in pleasure until the orgasm passed, making him collapse bonelessly back on the bed. He shuddered as Becky started to slowly pull her mouth up his flagging manhood, her tongue cleaning every inch of him. With a small pop, he felt the cool air of the room wash over his now limp member.

"Morning, Hero. Did you sleep well?" Becky smirked as she crawled up the bed and snuggled into him.

"Yes, but I woke even better," Alvin replied as he wrapped her body in his arms. "Did you manage to upgrade your gear?"

"I did, but then I collapsed before you came back. I woke to find you holding me protectively. It was very sweet, really. It took me a few minutes to wiggle out of your grip without waking you."

"Body pillows aren't supposed to walk off," Alvin chuckled.

Laughing lightly, Becky kissed his chest, "You goof. You were my body pillow, my leg was draped across your waist. Which is how I became aware of your eager state this morning."

"Probably the dreams I was having of a temptress with dark hair and lush curves," Alvin replied as he let his hands run over her soft, curvy form. "In fact, this body here is identical to the one in my dream."

Tilting her head back to look at him, “Really? You weren’t dreaming of a thinner, sleeker me?” Her eyes were searching his face, her uncertainty leaking through her façade.

He met her eyes with only acceptance, “I was dreaming of you, just as you are.” His tone became serious, “I care for you just as you are, Gothy. If you want to add a few more curves, I wouldn’t object. If you wanted to remove a little bit of your padding, I won’t object to that either. I have found I care for you, Gothy, for who you are. That sassy, brash, wanton, lustful, fearless woman who has made me feel. Your physical appearance does excite me, but your soul is what has captured me.”

Her eyes shifted across his face as he spoke as if looking for a lie. Not seeing any hint of one she trembled slightly, her eyes dampening. “Hero…”

He dipped his head, pressing his lips to hers. “Shh. There is nothing you need to say,” he whispered softly to her. “We are going out into the new, deadlier world together. I am filled with elation that you wish to be with me. Other men might try to talk you out of going, to plead for you to stay here and be safe. I won’t, though. You’ve made it plain you want to be with me and I will honor that wish.”

“How do you do this to me?” Gothy replied, her voice trembling with emotion. “You make me feel. No one has made me feel like you do. Your words seem to pluck at me, making me want to dance to your every whim. All I can think of is being at your side, to help you, to love you. I never thought I would feel like this and you do it to me so effortlessly.”

“Truthfully Gothy, I feel the same. We both have broken edges, and they seem to match up perfectly to each other. It scares me, honestly it makes me tremble in fear that you can make me feel like this. I’ve known apathy, disdain and hate all my life. I’ve known respect only once, for the last foster parent I had. Even with all the women I’ve known, I’ve felt lust and desire but never emotions like I feel with you. Never this deep current of emotion, that I am forced to call love.”

She slid the few inches up to bring her lips to his, returning the gentle kiss from earlier. “My broken Hero, I will stay with you.”

He clutched her to him firmly drinking in the scent of her. “Damn it, Gothy, you’re making my eyes water.” He began to tickle her sides, making her squirm and laugh. He stopped after a moment, releasing her and rolling off the bed. “You ready?”

She looked up at him, her eyes shining, reaching out her hand. Alvin took it, bringing her to her feet as she answered him, “As soon as I’m dressed, Hero.”

Chuckling, he swatted her ass as she walked away, “Smart ass.”

Laughing, she winked and took his hand, leading him to the bathroom. She got him into the shower and scrubbed him down, for once without trying to tempt him into sex. She did it very solemnly, as if preparing him for a ritual or combat. When she was finished he returned the favor, though his hands might have been a bit more explorative than hers had been. Alvin got his clothes from his bag while Becky stayed in the bathroom to dress.

She appeared in the doorway and Alvin could only stare. Her lips ticked up into a smile at his stunned expression. She spun, showing him her outfit. Black leather boots encased her feet, rising up to her calves. Black leather pants continued up her legs, Alvin’s eyes following them up to where they vanished under her corset. The red and black corset hugged her body, supporting and accentuating her already impressive… tracts of land. A long leather coat completed the ensemble. Wrenching his eyes up to her face, Alvin was met with her knowing smirk. A dark red, almost black band covered her forehead. Peeking out from her hair were two small horns the same color as the band. “What do you think, Hero?”

A wide smile lit his face as he moved to her, taking her into his arms. “You certainly look like the temptress I called you. All that delicious leather caressing your sinful body. And those two little horns giving warning of your true nature.”

Giggling, she kissed him lightly, “I thought it might be going a bit far, but it’s all best quality gear. Plus, maybe it will remind you to give me attention when we find the time. I know once we’re out there, our time to enjoy the more carnal fun will be vastly curtailed. And that’s fine, but when we do have the time and safety for it, I’m going to be very demanding of you.”

“I will be quite demanding in return, my beautiful temptress of sin.” He kissed each of her two horns before claiming her lips for a moment. When he broke the kiss, he stepped back, brushing the duster back to make it billow slightly. “How do I look?”

“Good enough to eat,” Becky replied, her lips compressing as she tried to keep her smile hidden.

Shaking his head, he picked up his backpack, slinging it over his shoulder then picking up the rifle and causing it to vanish into a glove, followed by the pistol. “Would you object to being my companion?” He asked it as nonchalantly as he could while hoping for her to answer yes.

Becky’s eyes widened slightly, “You mean from the Powers list in the store?”

Alvin nodded, “I wanted to ask before taking it.”

She kissed him tenderly, “No, I don’t object at all. Please make me yours. Again.”

Alvin summoned Jarvis to him, “Jarvis?”

Jarvis appeared instantly with a pad already in hand and on the right page, “Here you are, sir.”

Alvin purchased the upgrade, leaving him with 18,045 XP. A spark leapt from him to Becky and back, leaving a tingling feeling in his chest, “Wow, that was electric.”

“You sure shocked me,” Becky quipped. She had a pad in hand, scrolling through the display. “So many upgrades to this power. Something to look at in the future.”

Alvin agreed, letting his pad go which caused it to vanish. “I still have XP. Give me your clothes, I’ll finish upgrading them.”

Becky smirked, “Sure it’s not just because you want to watch me strip?”

Grinning, he replied to her, “That is a very nice bonus, but not the underlying reason.”

She stripped quickly, not making a show of it like she usually did and handed him the pile, claiming another kiss in return. “Don’t make me wait long.”

Alvin ducked back to his cell and quickly upgraded her clothing as much as he could with the XP he still had. He handed them back to her, getting another kiss in the process. “While you get your stuff together, I’m going downstairs so I don’t end up dragging you back to bed again.”

Her eyes flashed as she watched him, “I guess we should be going without too many more delays.”

Alvin laughed as he headed out of the room. Terry was behind the bar in the main room, a tray with covered dishes on the bar. She waved him over, “I have some food for you and Becky. Figured you might wake up late. While you eat I’ll let the others know you’re awake.”

Alvin took the seat at the bar and uncovered the dishes. Ham, cheese and bread were not a standard breakfast, but Alvin didn’t mind. He had assembled sandwiches by the time Becky joined him with her suitcase in hand. Her shotgun was slung over her shoulder. They ate quickly, washed down with the coffee on the tray.

When they walked out of the Inn, they found everyone from the Settlement in the yard waiting for them. Dressed mostly in the black, the duo didn't look like envoys or heroes. If anything, they looked like classical villains. Everyone stepped back slightly, a murmur of apprehension running through the crowd. Alvin's lips twitched at the response that was so familiar to him. It helped ground him, from all the unfamiliar emotions he had been dealing with. "Stay safe. If we can find others, we'll be sending them here."

David took a step forward, "She's the only real family I have. Bring her back to me." His voice was firm but his eyes were moist as he finished speaking.

"She is as important to me, if not more so, than she is to you. I will do my very best to keep her alive," Alvin replied simply.

Becky stepped forward, giving her brother a hug. She whispered to him, "Take care of Bridgett. She'll be good for you."

David's cheeks colored slightly as he returned the hug. Bridgett gave Becky a hug as soon as David moved. "Thank you," Bridgett said softly, "I'll take care of him."

Becky's smile was honest as she returned the hug before stepping back to Alvin's side, "We'll be back eventually with word of what's happening out there."

Alvin's mustang was now black with gold racing stripes. Bill shook Alvin's hand as he opened the door, "Thank you for the help. There will always be a place for you here."

"The trunk has been filled with food and water," Susan added as she gave Becky a hug. "The same is true for you. If you need a place to rest, come back."

As Alvin turned to get into the car, a loud roar echoed through the air. Everyone looked up to see a massive shape high in the sky, easily several thousand feet up, flapping massive wings as it flew west. The body

from neck to tail tip was clearly at least three times the size of a commercial passenger plane. The sun glinted off the bright blue scales that covered the beast. All around it, small shapes flew with it as if they were a protective detail.

The crowd was silent as they watched the beast fly. The silence was broken by a voice asking a question. “Daddy, are those dragons?” Joanna asked as she tugged on Justin’s hand.

“We’re going to need bigger guns,” Bill grunted.

Character Info

Alvin Leon Lambert
Human (24 experience)

Brawn 3.31
Nimbleness 5.23
Aptitude 4.69
Personability 3.00
Hardiness 3.79

Spells:

Powers:
Hologram AI
Hologram Merchant
Companion Slot- (Gothy)

1969 Mustang Boss 429 (Rare)
Armor: 9
Durability: 919,253/1,000,000
Upgradable: 9/9
No longer needs fuel to run, Indestructible tires good for all terrain and conditions even off-road, Four times initial durability, Six more armor

Zombie Cap (Rare)
Armor: 6
Durability: 495/500
Upgradable: 6/6
Water proofing, thermal insulated and cooling, Ten times initial durability, Six more armor

Zombie Shirt (Rare)

Armor: 6
Durability: 500/500
Upgradable: 6/6
Water proofing, thermal insulated and cooling, Ten times initial durability, Six more armor

Leather Patched Denim Pants (Rare)
Armor: 10
Durability: 550/550
Upgradable: 6/6
Water proofing, thermal insulated and cooling, Ten times initial durability, Six more armor

Combat Boots (Rare)
Armor: 11
Durability: 600/600
Upgradable: 6/6
Water proofing, thermal insulated and cooling, Ten times initial durability, Six more armor

Leather Duster (Rare)
Armor: 11
Durability: 750/750
Upgradable: 6/6
Water proofing, thermal insulated and cooling, Ten times initial durability, Six more armor

Interceptor Body Armor (Uncommon)
Armor: 18
Durability: 1000/1000
Upgradable: 4/4
Ten times initial durability, Four more armor

Fingerless Kevlar Gloves (Rare)
Armor: 7
Durability: 250/250
Upgradable: 6/6

Two spots of storage space, Ten times initial durability, Four more armor

IMI Desert Eagle .357 Magnum (Rare)
Damage: 11
Durability: 980/1000
Ammo type: .357 Magnum (Jacketed)
Upgradable: 3/6
Unlimited ammo on reload, Five times initial durability, Reduces armor of target by half

Type 56 (Rare)
Damage: 25
Durability: 4599/5000
Ammo type: 7.62x39 mm (Jacketed)
Upgradable: 3/6
Unlimited ammo on reload, Five times initial durability, Reduces armor of target by half

Rebecca Woodrow aka Becky aka Gothy
Human - (Companion of Alvin Leon Lambert) (no longer gains experience)

Brawn 3.02
Nimbleness 3.28
Aptitude 5.96
Personability 2.98
Hardiness 3.76

Spells:

Powers:

Horned Band (Rare)
Armor: 6
Durability: 125/125
Upgradable: 4/6
Five times initial durability, Six more armor

Leather Corset (Rare)
Armor: 11
Durability: 250/250
Upgradable: 4/6
Five times initial durability, Six more armor

Leather Pants (Rare)
Armor: 11
Durability: 250/250
Upgradable: 4/6
Five times initial durability, Six more armor

Combat Boots (Rare)
Armor: 11
Durability: 300/300
Upgradable: 4/6
Five times initial durability, Six more armor

Long Leather Jacket (Rare)
Armor: 11
Durability: 250/250
Upgradable: 4/6
Five times initial durability, Six more armor

Interceptor Body Armor (Uncommon)
Armor: 16
Durability: 1000/1000
Upgradable: 4/4
Ten times initial durability, Two more armor

Black Lace Gloves (Rare)

Armor: 2
Durability: 50/50
Upgradable: 3/6
Five times initial durability, Two more armor, Store two items

Remington 870 Police (Uncommon)
Damage: 50 (Depends on range)
Durability: 1892/2000
Ammo type: Slug (Jacketed)
Upgradable: 3/4
Unlimited ammo on reload, Five times initial durability, Reduces armor of target by half

S&W 1911 (Uncommon)
Damage: 8
Durability: 1216/1250
Ammo type: .45 ACP (Jacketed)
Upgradable: 3/4
Unlimited ammo on reload, Five times initial durability, Reduces armor of target by half

Author's Note

Just a quick note before the normal bit. For those who think Gothy is a bit farfetched, she is based on two people I have known. The combination of those two people resulted in Gothy.

Also, the story of Grandma Terry being chased home from school during WW2 is real. It's based on an incident that my grandmother experienced. She always told me to follow my dreams. I did, but sadly she was not cognizant enough to know it by the time I did so. She passed away early in 2017. May she find rest in knowing that her advice was taken to heart, if a little late.

If you want to keep up on my writing a bit more you can find me on Goodreads, and I have a blog I post to monthly which is synched to Goodreads.

Goodreads.com/Daniel Schinhofen author page

Other places you can keep up to date on me and my works:

https://www.patreon.com/DJSchinhofen

https://twitter.com/DJSchinhofen

Facebook Author page for Daniel Schinhofen

Fan group on Facebook for Daniel Schinhofen

If you LOVE LitRPG/Gamelit, then check out these pages full of awesome LITRPG/Gamelit goodness. You can interact with authors like me and many more. Find banter, good times and a lot of likeminded people.

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A big thank you to my editors and beta readers. Seriously, if not for you stalwarts I would be hammered so hard for my lack of proper grammar and the spelling errors. (*And good as I am, I can't catch them all, so my thanks go out to you all as well!- Editor*) Thank you to my beta readers; JD Williams, the first beta reader, well done sir. Jay Taylor, thank you for your time with beta reading and also being the admin of my fan page. The rest of the beta readers in no particular order; Matthew Murphy, Justin Johanson, Matthew Fraizer, Steven LoBue, Jonathon Hughes, Robert Peterson, William Reid, Scott Brown, Tarcha Saleeba, Jeremy Malouf, Arthur Cuelho, Orion Steen IV, Ben Smith, Alex Hartman and Josh Holmes.

A special thanks to three who went above and beyond the others, in doing so earned a free book each, as I was running a contest between my readers. JD Williams, Tarcha Saleeba, and Justin Johanson; you three gave me the most feedback. Though Arthur Cuelho was really close to you guys. Arthur, you fell just short, as such I'm will be giving him one as well.

A big thanks to my Patreon supporters who have gone above and beyond in their support:

J. Patrick Walker
Cody Carter
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Kyle Gravelle
Mitchell Hall

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Heather
James Patton
Brian Guerrero
Jeremy Schultz
Markdsm
Zach Hicks
Avery Doxtater
Godofcookie
Stephen Wise
Thomas M W Pollock
Aaron Nirider

I also want to point you towards a couple of fellow authors:

James Patton, is the author of Office Wars and the new Seventh Talon book, both of which are Gamelit. All set around the Odditek Universe. His work is hilarious.

https://www.amazon.com/James-G-Patton/e/B0714CD2DV

Eden Redd is an erotic author whose work I have enjoyed. She has a few LITRPG/Gamelit books in her catalog, notably the Lewd Saga Series. https://www.amazon.com/Eden-Redd/e/B00I8X8BCK

William Arand, man this guy can write some good books. Otherlife Dreams and Super Sales on Super Heroes are amongst his catalog.

https://www.amazon.com/William-D.-Arand/e/B01AY7PSG4

Randi Darren, He mixes in good story, with adult nature content, in a masterful way. Wild Wastes is a favorite of mine.

https://www.amazon.com/Randi-Darren/e/B06XQ1JM4W

Michael-Scott Earl, he has LITRPG/Gamelit titles, as well as books in other genres. He writes very good stories.

https://www.amazon.com/Michael-Scott-Earle/e/B019QSNVA2

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